


THE VILLAGE DOCTOR

SHEILA KAYE-SMITH



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024

<https://archive.org/details/villagedoctor0000shei>

SHEILA KAYE-SMITH has also written

IRON AND SMOKE

SPELL LAND

GREEN APPLE HARVEST

THE TRAMPING METHODIST

STARBRACE

THE CHALLENGE TO SIRIUS

TAMARISK TOWN

JOANNA GODDEN

ISLE OF THORNS

THE FOUR ROADS

THE END OF THE HOUSE OF ALARD

THE GEORGE AND THE CROWN

SAINTS IN SUSSEX

Published by E. P. DUTTON & Co., Inc.

THE DUTTON BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE VILLAGE DOCTOR

The Village Doctor

By SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

Author of "Iron and Smoke," "Joanna Godden,"
"The George and the Crown," etc.



NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.

THE VILLAGE DOCTOR, COPYRIGHT, 1929
BY E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED :: PRINTED IN U.S.A.

First PrintingJanuary, 1929
Fifth PrintingJanuary, 1929
Tenth PrintingJanuary, 1929
Fifteenth PrintingFebruary, 1929
Sixteenth PrintingFebruary, 1929
Seventeenth PrintingFebruary, 1929

THE VILLAGE DOCTOR

THE VILLAGE DOCTOR

CHAPTER I

§ I

More than fifty years ago, when Sussex farmers brewed their ale at home and kept the hay-making and the sheep-shearing as solemn feasts, when labouring men laboured at ten shillings a week, and their wives died of a thirteenth child, when both men and women still knew the typhus and the ague, and remembered the cholera—in those days Dr Philip Green came to Speldham.

He came to a fair, fresh country, unspoilt by the builder or the market-gardener, by the petrol-pump or the motor-car. The roads were still twisting ditches of marl, rambling from farm to farm, the cottages were scattered in picturesque rottenness among the hollows, and the village shops supplied the community without thoughts afield. Prosperity still dwelt in the farms—not as it dwelt in the days before the Repeal, but much more securely than in lean years to follow. The farmers had not yet broken their hearts and sent their sons to the Colonies and their daughters to the towns. In that

special border strip of Sussex the hops grew luxuriantly. In every sheltered field the vines stood sweetening August and September, and in every farmyard the white cowls of the oasts swung to the winds, and when the furnaces were lit under the drying-floor, breathed out the hop smoke to mingle with the other scents of harvest that thickened those dusks.

Dr Philip Green came to it all sadly. It was not what he would have chosen had he been rich or free. Had he been free he would have stayed where he was, as senior obstetrician at St Hugh's Hospital, Mile End. Had he been rich he would have bought a more interesting practice in a less lonely place. But the labours of a huge hospital in the midst of a slum had borne down his slight health. He had been ordered country air, if possible sea air, an outdoor, easier life, and a less heartrending administration of the body's inheritance.

He was a lonely man. A few aunts scattered in small Scottish towns were the only relations he had left, and for years these had not counted at all. Indeed his Scottish descent hardly counted now save in his ruddy hair. He belonged to the Midlands—to the Shires, as they were called in Speldham—where his father had worked as a doctor before him. His father had died a poor man, and all his estate had scarcely been enough to buy this country practice, though Lord knew that had been cheap—ominously cheap. He felt sure that the whole thing must have gone pretty well to pieces during his predecessor's last years. For years, he heard, it had been

impossible to get the old doctor out of bed o' nights, or out of his house in dirty weather. There had been no rival practitioner, so now the people were largely doctoring themselves, with herbs and simples and charms and old wives' tales. It was a cheerful prospect for the surgeon who came to them out of the light, out of the smell of chloroform and disinfectants, who had stood dressed as an angel in white and operated with sterilised instruments and aseptic ligatures.

§2

He arrived in an April twilight. The train sat snorting and throbbing in the little station, where the stones still smelt of sunshine though a shower was falling. He had been to see the place before, but it looked different, somehow, today. He had not seen it yet as the sun left it, nor as the Spring found it. It stood to him as a wintry mid-day place, with rain a-blowing down the street. The rain fell now, but heavily in large scattered drops, and the street and the houses were hidden behind a mile of orchards, bloomy with colours that shifted from the flush of the apple-blossom to the trembling tints of the pear, and the cherry's hard, papery white.

The station was a mile from the village, and he had asked his predecessor's servant to meet him with his predecessor's trap. So far he had accepted the lock, stock and barrel of Dr Shenstone's practice, including his three work-worn horses and his weather-worn serving-man. In time, no doubt, he would make changes, but

at present he had no pocket for substitutes. He must get on as he could. But he wished Bottom had been there—his unpunctuality promised ill. Bottom . . . no doubt the father of future Bothams and Bottomes, but at present accepting the full Shakespearean tradition of his name. He wished that he would come and not leave him standing here in the young year's cold. He turned to the station-master who had lumped his trunks like rocks upon the platform.

"Is there a carrier's cart?"

"Not for an hour or two yet, Sir. It comes in from Bulverhythe at eight, and calls at the station to see if we've got aught."

"Well, perhaps you'll put my luggage on it. I'll walk up to the house."

"Won't you wait for Bottom, Sir?"

"I've already waited five minutes, and it's cold. I think I must get on."

"Bottom's sure to come, Sir. It's only that he can't read what's o'clock—at least, only the hours; and these trains, running to odd minutes, queer him sadly."

"That must make things rather awkward"

"He's right enough for anything that isn't trains. He can tell by the sun all that matters for ordinary doings—that and the little hand on the clock. But he never took kindly to trains, and if you ask me, I think he goes late a'purpose, just to spite them."

This revelation of Bottom was hardly pleasing, but before the doctor could ponder it, he suddenly appeared,

driving a four-wheeled trap with great racket into the station yard.

He was—or rather looked, for appearances were probably deceptive—an immensely old man, sitting hooped over the reins, and descending labouriously with crooked legs. He wore no uniform—merely a greatcoat over breeches and leggings, and on his head a round black hat.

“Good evening, Doctor, good evening, Sir.”

His toothless smile, slightly malevolent, appeared in his face like a sudden bite in a pippin.

“Dr Green’s being waiting for you a tedious while,” said the station master, conscious of an absent apology.

“That’s your tedious train, Mus’ Cruttenden, same as ever was. She’s heathen in her ways, caring nothing for God’s sun in the sky. Even the old coach ’ud mind the sun a bit.”

“Now don’t you miscall my train. It’s your trap that’s heathen and your wicked old horse.”

“Old Mus’ Trimmer! No, he’s a Christian—almost a human being, Doctor. He could take the Old Un on his round and bring him back safe when he could hardly keep his saddle; and he never made any mistake of stopping at the public bar—always round to the parlour. These your trunks, Sir?”

§3

The cobbles of the little street were wet, washed by the shower which had suddenly quickened and passed.

The sky was pallid with the twilight, and shredded over with flying rags of cloud, among which the stars danced sedately. The hill of the street sloped steeply, and looking back as the trap climbed it, the doctor could see pools of dark country lying hushed and low behind him. It was all dim, already robbed of light, and featureless save for a thin strow of stars which he guessed must be the lights of farms. That was the country he would penetrate tomorrow, where most of his work would lie, for though the village itself held nearly eight hundred souls, there were many scattered hamlets as well as cottages and farms in the country round it, and no other doctor was nearer than Bulverhythe, the seaside town ten miles away.

As he looked back at that darkening country, he felt it to be a more impenetrable jungle than those slums that had ringed St Hugh's. Here dwelt strange beasts, similar to the one who was now driving him home. He found old Bottom's speech difficult to understand, and his mind seemed as remote as the mind of his horse. In East London speech was quick and wits were sharp; in East Sussex both were slow, thick and muddy, like one of those streams that creep through the marshes of the Kentish border. He felt a sudden stab of longing for the courts and alleys he had left, for the noise of the children playing in the street, the glare and racket of the public houses, the cheery smells of fish and beer . . . Oh, damn! How was he to live in this dim lonely place,

where there seemed to be neither light nor scent nor sound once day was done? The little windows were all dark and shut, and the only sound coming from the public house was the creak of the sign of the Chequers, swinging in the wind.

His house stood four doors above the silent inn—plumb on the street, so that, he reflected dismally, all the village could look in at his window. It was a solid old Georgian house, brown in the dusk, but with a welcoming splash of orange lamplight in one of the rooms.

The door was opened by the housekeeper, the only part of his establishment that had never belonged to Dr Shenstone. She was a London woman, a former patient, in need of country air like himself, whom he had brought to minister to his exile. It was a relief to see her bright Cockney face and hear her shrill Cockney tongue.

“Good evening, Doctor. Here you are at last. I thought you was never coming.”

She glanced upbraidingly at Bottom.

“Now, Pa, hurry down with the boxes.”

“In my good time, in my good leisure. Hereabouts we haven’t got your hurrying furrin ways.”

He proceeded to haul slowly at the boxes, muttering to himself. Dr Green foresaw conflict in his household. He went out to help Bottom, whose bent limbs seemed scarcely adequate to their task, but the housekeeper called out sharply—

“He’s all right, Doctor. He’s strong as a bus ’oss. You

come in—your supper's getting cold, and there's a woman waiting in the surgery."

"Already!"

He had not expected a patient this first night.

"Yes, and she's a Gyppo, same as you see at the races."

"Then you should have ought to have kept her out," cried Bottom. "The Old Un 'ud never attend Egyptians. He said they weren't Christians, and hadn't ordinary Christian diseases. Get 'em run in, he would, for rogues and vagabones."

"Dr Green ain't like that," said the housekeeper loftily. "Now don't put the tin box down on the basket."

"I'll go and see her at once," said Dr Green. "You can keep my supper hot, Mrs Conney. I'd much rather do my work now, and then have the evening in peace."

He was feeling tired and disheartened, and a little resentful of his patient's intrusion.

"Oh, let her wait. She can do another hour as she's done two."

But he had gone down the passage into the little surgery at the back of the house. Here a woman sat huddled, asleep under her shawl, but starting up on his entrance like a wild thing suddenly awakened.

"Good evening. What can I do for you?"

"Oh, it's my foot, kind gentleman. I can't do any more with it, so I just called in to have it mended."

"Let's have a look—"

A broken shoe was taken off and revealed what he had expected—a wound gone foul from dirt and want of

attention. She winced as he took her foot in his hand, then suddenly went quiet as she found that he did not hurt her. There were dressings in the surgery, though they were still unpacked, and for the next quarter of an hour Philip Green forgot that he was tired, homesick and disappointed. Disease was the same in Speldham as in Mile End, a call both to his compassion and his interest. He could not separate the two—be all scientist any more than he could be all sympathiser. It was not till the foot was cleansed and bound up that he remembered fully that he was in Speldham.

“Now, how are you going to get home?”

She stared at him with her big blank eyes, behind which mystery hung like a curtain.

“I go as I came, kind gentleman, if you would be so very gorgeous and noble as to give me a new pair of shoes.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he said smiling, “and you oughtn’t to wear a shoe on that foot for a long time.”

“Then give me a carriage and pair for me to drive in.”

“I’ll drive you now in my carriage and one, to the infirmary, if you’ll go there.”

“I’d die if I slept under a roof.”

“You’d be properly looked after, and sleep in a warm bed.”

“I’d sooner sleep on straw, and my sister Annalina will look after me. She’s a wise woman.”

He tried to persuade her, but she would not listen,

and in the end he summoned Bottom out of his warfare which he still waged with Mrs Conney about the lower parts of the house.

"Bottom, I want you to drive this lady to where she lives—a mile out on the North Trade road, she says."

Bottom was speechless.

"You'll be there and back in half an hour, and then you can go home."

"Master, the Old Un ud never have asked that of me."

"Why not? You've got the horse and trap here waiting, and it won't take you long."

"Such as her should ought to walk."

"She shouldn't have walked here, and she certainly mustn't walk back. Get along and do as I tell you."

"I'm scared of Egyptians. They ain't Christians like us."

"Get along."

Something in that last "get along" must have scared Bottom more than the Egyptians, for grumbling and cursing he climbed up into the driver's seat, while Dr Green hoisted the proud and winking gypsy into the back of the trap.

"Mad—mad"—he could hear Bottom mumbling to himself. "Never in my days. . . . Old Un. . . . Egyptians Christians. . . . tur'ble doings for us all."

CHAPTER II

§ I

The next morning the rumour was round Speldham that the new doctor had sent a woman from Egypt home in his carriage—"Riding like a queen, and mocking at Bottom so as he wur near to burst." The action was disapproved of, as likely to afford undue encouragement to a race which had always been the enemies of good, hard working folk. On the other hand, Bottom's humiliation was appreciated, and hopes were expressed that now maybe he'd learn his place.

He was still brooding over his injuries when Dr Green found him the next morning in the stables at the inn. Dr Shenstone had always kept his horses at the Chequers; there were three, a large roan gelding, both for shafts and saddles, and a bay mare, and a cob for riding only. Here also was kept "the trap"—an antique conveyance, tyreless, hoodless and springless, a sorry inheritance.

"The Old Un scarcely ever had it out," said Bottom, "and never in dirty weather. He knew what a larmentable job it ud be for me, having to clean it, wud my boäns full of pain and misery as they always are. He was

thoughtful for me, was the Old Un—he'd never expose me to damp weather or to mocking heathen. And it's clear that I never saddle a horse after bedtime. You sleep wud the stable key under your pillow, and when they come around to fetch you o' nights you saddle your own horse and stable him again afterwards."

Dr Green felt inclined to punch Bottom's head, but thought it as well to refrain thus early, though it was a treat he promised himself later.

"Well, which mount shall I start out with?"

"Can you ride?"

"Of course I can ride, or I shouldn't have taken on this job!"

"Old Trimmer's the quietest horse, but he's the slowest—in his gait, not in his wits. His wits are near human, and he's the best to take out o' nights, as he knows this country like a map. Maudie's the swiftest and Caesar's the strongest, so there they are all three, and you takes your choice."

"I'll try the mare, then, as Trimmer was out last night. But I expect there's generally work enough for all of them."

"Surely—plenty of work around here for man and beast. You should ought to be like the Old Un and learn folks not to be tiresome wud their diseases. 'Now Mrs Harman,' he'd say, 'there'll be no sence having that brat o' yours in the middle of the night, 'cause I don't get up before the sun, no not for any woman's pains,' and believe me that infant would arrive after break-

fast—leastways she wouldn't never dare send for him till then, which all comes to the same thing."

§2

It was a fine brisk day for a ride, and Dr Green felt his spirits rise as he set off up the High Street. To his more hopeful glance the houses looked bright and trim, a welcome change from the slatternly slums he had left. He passed one or two small shops, and a comfortable-looking square house set back from the street behind a row of pollard elms—this belonged to Mr Horace Taverner, the lawyer, whom he had already met and liked for a simple good fellow. At the end of the High Street where it made an elbow with its continuation to Cackle Street, stood the Church, a squat building almost of Saxon times, and next to it the Rectory, hidden behind high walls and a jungle of bushes.

His first visit was to the gipsy encampment on the North Trade road—a mile beyond the village. It was a new experience to leave his horse tethered to a field gate, while he crawled into the tunnel of a brown tent where he could scarcely see his patient for smoke. These gipsies were still true to the tradition of their fathers, and shunned the flashy caravans in which their half-bred cousins trailed after circuses and fairs. Their travelling equipment consisted only of two covered carts and three brown canvas tents, which managed somehow to shelter a dozen adults and apparently several dozen children.

The doctor's visit was a new experience for them too, and an overwhelming surprise. It is true that he had sent Aurora Lovell home like a queen in a carriage, with her foot tied up in a clever gorgeous way that kept the pain out of it; but they had never imagined he would follow up this generosity with a personal call, and it was surprising to be told that the bandages needed changing already, though by the way they were put on you would think they would have lasted for weeks.

So much care and liberality on the part of their physician prompted them to reveal to him other ailments—Savaina's spots and little Pyramus's sore place, old Mrs Stanley's lump, and the queer shape Jasper's arm had gone since he fell off his horse. Dr Green was kept there nearly half the morning diagnosing complaints and setting a broken arm. He arranged for a couple of lads to call for the various lotions and unguents—mostly vermicidal—that he would prepare when the evening gave him leisure; then, breaking through the swarm of children and dogs that barred his retreat, he rode off on the prancing Maudie, who had never waited so long for the Old Un, save outside a public-house.

His next visit was to a farm some two miles north of Speldham, in the valley which last night had been a pool of darkness and scattered stars. So far his patients had shown no disposition to crowd him. An interregnum of two or three months had driven them more and more to rely on kitchen physic, and before then they had been

taught not to expect medical attendance save in the most urgent matters of birth and death. But three days ago the farmer's son had fallen out of an apple tree and dislocated his shoulder. It had been set by the blacksmith, who was also the veterinary surgeon, but as the boy was not making good progress a message had come up that morning—"Would the doctor call and see young Harry Peascod at Churchsettle."

He knew the Peascods by name as a family of rather wild young men who lived and worked with their father on one of the largest farms in the district. They had a reputation for turning the heads and breaking the hearts of the young women of Speldham, for flirting with gipsies, and for getting drunk at the pub as well as on their own strong ale. He found their place looking active and prosperous. Cows were being driven into the barn for milking, while further afield the harrow passed over a rich Spring sowing. Round the house, a jumbled old place of thatch and tiles, the apple blossom foamed in a lake of flushing white. Sam Peascod, the father, stood in the yard, his head thrown back and a pot of beer to his mouth.

"Marnun' doctor!" he shouted. "Come to see the lad?"

"That's right. Where shall I find him?"

"Oh, you go around to the house door, and Sue will let you in. She's done the nussing, so reckon she'll be able to tell you more about un than I."

Doing as he was told, he went to a green-painted door

round which a huddle of fowls awaited feeding time. As he stood there in the warm sunshine of the April noon he felt faintly ridiculous and out of place. In spite of having set out on horseback he wore the black uniform of his profession, in which he had penetrated the darkest slums of the London riverside, proclaimed by it as "the doctor" and therefore safe from attack. Now it struck him that he would have to change. In these quiet parts there was no need to provide for personal safety, and dark town clothes were ridiculous in a world of corduroys.

The door opened, and he found himself rather unexpectedly confronting a tall, beautiful girl, sunburnt yet fair, who wore an apron over her blue cotton gown.

"Good morning, doctor—will you come upstairs?—Shoo!" to the fowls—"it isn't your time yet."

He found his patient abed in a large attic, and in a short time had undone the blacksmith's work and set the shoulder comfortably. The boy seemed scarcely more than a young animal, suffering like an animal, and then like an animal forgetting his pain, but the girl was of an altogether different stamp, and he wondered who she was. At first he had thought she might be a servant, but she had soon shown him she wasn't that. On his way downstairs he ventured to ask her.

"May I enquire if you are Miss Peascod?"

"Yes, I'm Miss Peascod, but I'm not the Master's daughter—I'm his niece. I keep house for them all here."

"That must be a heavy undertaking."

He was going to add "for anyone so young," but refrained.

"Oh, it isn't very hard. Being so many men, a woman scares them."

She grinned broadly with good white teeth, and his heart warmed towards the first friendly and sociable being he had met since he came to Speldham.

"You find it easier to manage men than women?"

"Surely"—she laughed—"any woman does. You won't scare a horse with another horse, but you'll scare him with a donkey."

She opened the house door, and he half hoped she would come with him across the yard to where his mount was tethered beyond it. But she stopped on the threshold.

"I must get back to my kitchen. Good morning, Doctor, and thank you."

"I'll call again in a few days."

She nodded and shut the door.

He walked slowly across the yard, which was empty now, save for the little mob of chickens keeping watch on the house. The sunshine split itself bravely on the stones, and barns and oasthouses stood red and white against a sky of dancing blue. Here and there a barn door was open, showing a cave of cool shadow, and suddenly as he looked into one of these he saw two figures, a man and a girl embracing.

He immediately looked away. The gesture was too

intimate and too passionate for him to bear to gaze on it, and these two young creatures evidently thought they were unobserved in their refuge. But the brief glance had somehow impressed them both upon his mind with unforgettable clearness. The man must be a young Peascod—he had seen enough to recognise the family build and features—but the girl seemed to belong to another world, with her pale, fragile face and her delicate gown. She was evidently a lady, some Squire's or Parson's daughter—and here she was, hugging a farmer's son in a barn. . . Well, anyway it was none of his business.

CHAPTER III

§ I

For a little while that first day at Speldham stood out as memorable, with its round of gipsies, farmers and farm-labourers, but before long it had slipped into a stream of similar days—days that went by to the cllop of hoofs and the drawl of warm, slow voices, days that began with the sunlight on his pillow, and ended with his eyes closing on starshine, days that were full of fresh breezes and clean rain and simple food, bringing him back to health, and yet had fretting under them the undertone of human ignorance and misery, the slave-song of those whom such gifts of sun and air should have made free.

There seemed to be nearly as much sickness in the cottages as in the slums, though of a different kind. He found less disease directly due to dirt or malnutrition—though these existed in their smaller degree—but more of the consequences of indifferent housing and exposure to bad weathers. Smallpox and typhus, the scourges of Shoreditch, were non-existent at the present moment in that agricultural world—though when he considered local sanitation he sometimes wondered what would be

Speldham's fate should an epidemic arise. On the other hand phthisis and rheumatism and even the ague all were common among those who toiled by day in the damp clays of the weald, and slept at night in fast-shut, crowded bedrooms—too much cold air out of doors and too little inside.

The farms were healthy enough—the farmers, though many were unprosperous compared with old Corn Law standards, led fairly comfortable lives, ate and drank and slept well, kept themselves clean and kept themselves warm. But their ploughmen and their stockmen were not so fortunate. Most of them had married young, for wages were highest in youth, and by the time a man was thirty he often had seven or eight small children to bring up on only a few more shillings a week. It is true that he also had a cottage, and generally fuel and milk, but the cottage was often in bad repair and always too small for the family that lived in it.

There was only one big landowner in the district, and the workpeople on his estate fared slightly better than those on the farms. Lord Rushfurlong, eighth baron, had his family seat at Galleybird Hall, some five miles out of Speldham, over towards Brede. He had a reputation for harshness, owing to his rigorous enforcement of the game laws, but he was a prosperous young man, who spent his money on his farms as well as on his woods, so that his tenants could count at least on tight roofs and dry walls. Dr Green had been in Speldham

two months before he met Lord Rushfurlong. He had no expectations of ever being summoned to Galleybird, for he understood that his lordship was attended by a fashionable doctor from Bulverhythe. It was not perhaps altogether surprising that he and his lady should have sent twelve miles for a physician rather than depend on the Old Un's eccentric ministrations.

For some time he was to feel the effects of his predecessor's reign. It took several months to convince Speldham and its farms that here was a doctor who would attend you when you were "scarce abed," and required neither the threat of your departure from this world nor anything particularly sensational in your entrance of it to make him come to see you. Also this new doctor did not insist on your having "your money in your hand" when you called him in. He would wait till a return to work brought better times—indeed it was discovered that he would wait even longer, and in due course Philip Green found himself obliged to restore at least a part of the Old Un's discipline.

At first he was kind. He yearned over these ignorant and neglected creatures, who were like sick animals in their pain. He was a shepherd of bodies, a priest of the physical, and his soul was hot with his desire to find better pasture for their flesh and blood. He appeared as a threat on the Speldham Parish Council, telling the villagers that their water supply was unfit for cattle—he brought before landlords the need for new buildings and repairs. He would have been unpopular if he had

been a man less meek, less sociable and ready for a friendly glass. As it was they heard him with half a smile; he was a furriner, a Londoner, who knew nothing of Sussex ways. Why, the Speldham brook had been the Speldham drain for hundreds of years before he was born, and men had lived and died peacably beside it, just as for hundreds of years men had staunched their wounds with cobwebs, been bled for fever, and driven out the sweat with herb tea, and had lived and died just the same. Live and die—live and die, what can a man do more than that? And if sometimes there's only a short step between the living and the dying, doesn't that make it easier for them who have too many mouths to feed and for the young folk that come after? What would we do in Speldham if every child that's born lived to ninety years? Let us live and die, Doctor—live and die. Come around and see us when we're sick, and give us stuff that'll make us feel better. But don't meddle with the things at the back of our lives, for they've always been there, and we don't want them changed—ever.

§2

Though he had none of the concentrated hard work that used to be his in London, he found that his day was well crowded from morning till night. It was not the number of his patients that filled it, but the distances between them. A morning round might involve four attendances in a twenty mile ride. His stable was only just

adequate, though at first he had wondered how he could possibly find work for three horses. Now he knew that he must always change his mount at midday, and have a third in reserve for unexpected calls. At present it was all manageable, but he sometimes wondered what he should do in the event of any widespread sickness, such as he might expect when winter came, or even when the neighbourhood finally emancipated itself from the Old Un's tradition, and summoned its doctor ruthlessly at its will.

So far he had been very rarely called out of bed, and his evenings were seldom interrupted after the surgery closed. Even in his predecessor's day the surgery had been open from seven to nine, and medicine bought as over the counter of a chemist's shop. Folk whom he had never otherwise attended came in quest of "a good sarching medicine." No draught which was not a purgative was considered the slightest good. "I've brought her back 'cos she doän't sarch me," said an ancient labourer of Ringlets Farm to whom he had sold a bottle of liniment. He found that prescribing and dispensing drugs kept him busy long after his day's work was supposed to be over, and at first this made him tired enough to go early to bed. But as his health improved with exercise and fresh air, the habit of his London life began to reassert itself; he sat up late, and wished for company.

And company there was none.

He had not realised when he planned his exile how

completely he was cutting himself off from his own sort of human society. He had vaguely imagined that the neighbourhood would contain at least some gentlefolk, who would come to his house and invite him to their houses. There would be anyhow the parson and the lawyer and the Squire. But at close quarters these notables dissolved, and any hope of their companionship passed into disappointment. The Squire was Lord Rushfurlong, who did not visit in Speldham, and except for him the neighbourhood seemed to consist entirely of farmers—excellent men, no doubt, but incapable of giving him the society and conversation that he craved for. There were one or two “great” families living nearer the coast, but here again the curse of the Old Un was upon him, and they sought their physician in Bulverhythe.

Taverner, the lawyer, was a good fellow, but newly wed, and at that moment preoccupied with his young wife, who was expecting her first baby in two or three months. She refused to go out, and he spent his evenings with her. Perhaps later on, when the doctor had steered them through the crisis of their too-absorbing parenthood, they would emerge as human beings and give him their society. But at present he must only vaguely think of Taverner as a cheery fellow, and of his wife as a pretty healthy little thing, who would probably do very well when her time came.

Mr Roffey, the parson, did not give hopes of even

future intercourse. He was a fierce, elderly man, shaggy of hair and glittering of eye, who treated his parishioners less as his flock than as a beleaguering army. His house was his castle—his besieged castle, with himself and his wife for garrison. He had been at Speldham over thirty years, succeeding an almost mythical clergyman, who had come in the seventeen-nineties, and was also known as the Old Un, to the complication of local gossip, wherein the name might stand equally for the old doctor, the old rector, or—according to general Sussex tradition—the devil himself.

Mrs Roffey was never seen except in church, and only occasionally there of late. Philip Green's first glimpse of her showed him the grey, cataphysical hues of advanced malignant disease, and his professional conscience drove him to approaches that were one and all decidedly, indeed surlily, repulsed by her husband. A call at the Rectory was like an advance under a flag of truce. The two big main gates were locked and chained upon the weed-grown drive, and a door in the wall admitted tradesmen and visitors. The hall door was also locked and chained, and after persistent knocking would—or rather, might—be opened by the Rector himself, standing in the entrance, as if anxious to hide the shadow-darkened hall. Hardly ever had anyone been allowed to come inside, and then it had been only as far as a huge, cold study, smelling of closed windows and old books, and looking straight into the heart of a yew.

From this fastness Mr Roffey emerged on Sundays, and entering the church by a private way, conducted an incredible service, consisting of Morning Prayer, Litany, Table Prayers and sermon. To the doctor's surprise, there was always a crowded congregation, filling all the vast, box-like pews, and heaping the galleries that sagged above them. The service belonged to an order of things that he had never seen in London, already developing its tractarian civilisation. A monotoned duet between the Parson and the Clerk paused only for the eruptions of a mixed choir, accompanied by two cornets. Hymns Ancient and Modern had not penetrated as far as Speldham, where Tate and Brady still held an outpost of their falling empire, and there was a certain charm in the clear young voices—workhouse boys and girls, and a few of their betters—sending to the roof that minstrelsy which is not the worship of towns.

The sermon was the biggest surprise of all. Unlike most sermons of the day, it was not read, but delivered from voluminous notes. These notes evidently represented the sum of the Reverend Martin Roffey's theological reading during the week, and were the frame-work of a discourse weighty, learned, fervent, adventurous and totally incomprehensible. He addressed his congregation of children and bumpkins as if they were a University senate—

“I expect many of you are confused by the apparent contradictions in the Elohist and Jahvist passages of the Pentateuch”.

“‘Ah,’ but you will say to me, ‘you have entirely forgotten Q in your interpretation’”

This was Dr Green’s first encounter with the “Higher Criticism,” though he had heard the rumour of the horror of Colenso. He had not expected to meet it in company with Tate and Brady and a Parish Clerk. At first he doubted how much the congregation appreciated its pastor’s flights of intellect; but Bottom reassured him.

“That’s präaper stuff he gives us. That’s stuff as you’d never git save in Church. What do men like you and me go to church for? It ain’t to look at the girls or hear the children squeekin’ like rats under a board. It’s so as we can git präaper Parson’s stuff. You gives us doctor’s stuff fur our bodies and he gives us Parson’s stuff fur our souls, and as we’d never lik your stuff if it wurn’t powerful and sarchin,’ so we wouldn’t lik his’n. He’s a fine, larned, well-filled parson, is Mus’ Roffey, and as all we see of him’s in church, I reckon the longer we sit in church and look at him the better.”

“But surely the young people get tired of such long sermons.”

“There aun’t long sermons! Why, he never talks over the hour, and the Old Un before him ’ud go on till our bellies was long past dinner time. I’ve heard him preach for two hours and a quarter—he said it was the only way of keeping folk out of conventicles. They’d never stay in the Church if it got said as he couldn’t preach as long as any dissenter.”

§3

It had never been the doctor's custom to drink afternoon tea, which indeed was not in those days considered a proper custom for anyone save fashionable ladies. But as his surgery hours made supper often very late, he would sometimes, if his patients allowed him, call home towards five o'clock for a glass of beer and a mouthful of bread and cheese. One evening in July, when he was sitting in his study enjoying this respite, he heard wheels draw up at his door. No doubt it was another summons, or a patient called on the chance of finding him at home. He heard several sets of footsteps enter the house, but to his surprise they did not pass the study on their way to the surgery, but instead went upstairs, where there was nothing but the drawing-room.

Who could these be? Callers? Mrs Conney would usher no one else up the carpeted first flight into that utterly unused and useless room which he had left much as the Old Un had left it, waiting in dim and faded expectation of a visit from the quality. He heard her scuttering down, and the next minute she knocked at his door.

"There's three ladies called to see you, Sir. They said they wasn't patients, so I put 'em in the drawing-room. Is that all right?"

"Perfectly right, Mrs Conney. Did they give you their names?"

"I didn't ask 'em."

He wondered who it could be. If one of the county families wished belatedly to call, surely the man of the house would have paid the visit. Ladies did not call on lonely bachelors even in conveys. These must have some special purpose or else be ignorant of social lore. Regretfully he knocked out his pipe, and went upstairs.

There they sat, very upright on three chairs in three different parts of the room. Evidently a mother and daughters, fashionably dressed—at least it seemed so to his innocent eye. All three stood up as he came in.

“Good afternoon, Dr Green,” said the older woman, “I hope you’ll forgive us not coming to call on you before, but to tell you the truth we didn’t know till the other day that you wanted visitors.”

The doctor was speechless.

One of the girls continued.

“Your manservant told our manservant that you were very lonesome. He said there was no proper company for you in Speldham, so we said to Father he ought to call, and would you believe it, we got him all dressed up and ready to go, and then at the last minute he wouldn’t.”

They spoke with the slurry intonations of the South, but he could hear a battle in their voices, as if they fought for refinement in accent as well as in word.

“It really is extremely good of you.”

He wondered if he could ask who Father was. Then it suddenly seemed to him that he had seen one of the

girls before. They were both pretty, but not alike. He seemed to recognise the dark one. Of course it was quite likely that he had seen her about in the village, no doubt very differently dressed.

He must have been staring at her, for she dropped her eyes, and spoke for the first time.

"We come from Coarsehorne, you know, over by Rushy Green."

"Blazier, the name is," said her mother.

"Oh yes, of course. I know."

He vaguely remembered the name and the farm. Coarsehorne was about two miles out, a large place, not very well kept. He had never been there, nor met the farmer, though he had often ridden past the gate.

"My husband's a gentleman farmer," continued Mrs Blazier, "and of course it's not very congeniteel for him, as he's no one of his own kind living near. That's why I felt you and he would get on together—it would be nice for you both. But we couldn't get him to come, could we, girls?"

The girls frowned as at a painful memory.

"Er—can I offer you any refreshment?"

What did one do on these occasions? He wished they had not come. Their semi-gentility plagued his shyness more than either of its extremes. He got on well with the cottagers and farmers, and the thoroughbred Squirearchy would have put him at his ease. But what was he to do with these three? He felt awkward and uneasy, for

he was ignorant of women. A sisterless youth had given place to the virile atmosphere of a hospital, where hard work has combined with his own particular disposition to shut him into a male world.

"Can I offer you any refreshment?" he repeated awkwardly.

"Well, I could do with a glass of something."

A gleam of unexpected humanity had shot from Mrs Blazier, but was immediately dowsed by her girls.

"Mama, we can't stop now—we must be getting home."

Their eyes were on the clock for the legal quarter-of-an-hour.

"Well, my dear, ut's an unaccountable hot day, and it seems to me we've only just come."

He saw hopes of her refinement melting under physical stress; possibly with her it was only skin deep. A mischievous spirit—suddenly born of his resentment—made him repeat and press his offer. Finally he rang for Mrs Conney and asked her to bring up some ale and glasses.

"I can't pretend it's home-brewed, but I get a cask from the Chequers, and I think it's good."

The two daughters were evidently disgusted with their mother. They pursed their lips and frowned and looked at the ceiling, refusing to join in the conversation, which now had come off its hind legs and ran along fairly easily.

"I was just having a glass myself when you arrived."

"Then I'm glad I've given you a chance to have another."

"I hope you like that ale."

"Oh, it's fine stuff. They always had a good brew at the Chequers. I like a glass of ale, even though it's cheaper than tea. Anyway, it's much more cooling on a hot day."

He still felt a mischievous delight in escorting her out of the niceties of her speech into the common drawl and idiom of her kind. But he could not get her to talk quite like a farmer's wife—evidently it was true that she had been bred at least differently, probably in a town. From time to time he took a covert glance at the girls. They sat almost lifelessly, and it suddenly struck him that they really suffered—that they were stifling in their hearts a definite pain. . . . Father's desertion and Mother's lapse . . . between them they had spoiled an adventure. He could almost feel sorry for the poor silly things, sitting there so simperingly and sadly—and they were pretty too in their two different ways . . . where the dickens had he seen the dark one before?

"Well, I reckon I must be going."

He would not prolong her daughters' ordeal by detaining her. But he would say something kind and hope to comfort them.

"It is really most good of you to call on a lonely

man. Perhaps some day you will let me come and see you."

He looked at the dark one and smiled.

§4

He did not often invite gossip with Bottom—as a rule it was thrust upon him too generously to need any invitation—but that evening when he brought back Trimmer to the stables he lingered deliberately for chat.

"Some ladies came to see me this afternoon, Bottom."

"Yes, Mäaster, I heard as they'd been."

"You know them, I believe. At least they hinted that I owe you the honour of their visit."

"How's that, Sir?"

"They said you'd told their manservant I was lonely."

Bottom burst into a hoot of derisive laughter. All the scorn of his being seemed to fasten on one word.

"Their 'manservant'! Did you ever hear the like of that? Their manservant! That's a valiant name for a lumping, clumping calf like Tommy Dixter. 'Manservant'! And him scarce out of the charity school—put out by the work 'us he was—a poor-law child! And he goes about calling himself a manservant! Leastways, I reckon it äun't him as does it—he'd never dare, the poor dumb owl. It's them what goes setting themselves above their neighbours and talking about manservants when all they mean is dirty poor-'ous boys. Manservant! I'd like to manservant 'em!"

"You needn't be so angry, Bottom. They called you a manservant too."

"I äun't a manservant, Master. I'm an honest labouring man, and I'd scorn to be anything else. The Old Un never called me a manservant. A manservant doänt wait on 'osses—he waits on humans like a fool. You'll never get me to hand a teacup—not as I reckon that Dixter has ever seen a teacup in his life, the poor rabbit. My job's in the stables and around the house, not inside it. The Old Un ud sometimes call me his totem, and a true and faithful totem I tried to be to him, and will be to you, Sir, if you don't go slinging all that nonsense about manservants. It's them Blaziers wot have always set themselves above their station and talked 'A-o-oh' so genty-eel—so genty-eel—A-o-oh so elly-gant—such elly-gant ladies of quality—A-o-oh."

This alarming reproduction of a refined voice finally shattered Bottom's eloquence and the doctor had space to ask if the Blaziers were Speldham born.

"Yes, Sir. Leastways, all but the Missus. She came from Brighton, where her father kept a pub."

"Perhaps that accounts for their giving themselves a few airs."

"And why should they give themselves airs because their mother came from Brighton? A low, fishing place, that's what Brighton is, for all their kings and queens and palaces. But she's come along and told Blazier as he's to call himself a 'gentleman farmer,' when he's as much a gentleman as their charity boy's a manservant."

"It struck me that she was a good deal homelier than her daughters."

"Maybe, but it's her doing if the girls have flown so high. Would you believe it, but she had them christened after heathen goddesses—Laura and Clara—when her poor husband was on his knees before her begging for Bible names. I wonder the pläace äunt come to bad luck with it. And then she must send them to school—not to the Parish, but to a pläace over at Bulverhythe, where they larned 'em to be fine and despise their parents. And sarve her right, I say, but I'm sorry for their poor dad."

"Come, come, Bottom, don't be so hard. They're both extremely pretty girls, and do their parents credit. I should think they ought to marry well."

Bottom laid a finger leeringly against his nose.

"They woän't. At least not one of 'em."

"Why?"

"Because Laura she's set her heart on Saul Peascod down at old Churchsettle. Reckon her heart's undone all her vain doings, for if she marries Saul, he'll rattle her up präaperly."

So that was where he had seen her before! He remembered now—the sunny yard and the glooming barn, and the lift of the girl's delicate face in the light. . . . He had thought her a parson's or a squire's daughter. But her refinement was the polish, not the grain. Saul Peascod would rub it off, kiss it off . . . she would have to work hard and bear many children. He was sorry—surprised to find himself so sorry . . . and yet there

was a pleasing irony in the thought that this girl who had been so carefully bred above her station had given her heart to one of those rackety Peascods, whom many of the village looked down upon for their roughness and wild ways. A glass of ale for the mother, a kiss for the daughter, and both were honest earth again.

CHAPTER IV

§ I

Philip Green would have found still more to interest him could he have heard his visitors' conversation on their way home. The first part of it was devoted to the condemnation and justification of their mother's lapse. Her daughters declared that she had disgraced them, while she on her side insisted on the fundamental elegance of a glass of ale.

"I could never have asked his housekeeper to bring tea—it would have been putting her to too much trouble, and I knew there was ale in the house, 'cause his breath smelt of it. It's bad manners to refuse an offer of refreshment."

"Not on a first call. He was only doing it out of politeness. It would have been much better to have declined and taken our leave."

However, they were all too anxious to talk about the doctor to waste much time in argument. The battle was allowed to die down before they were out of Speldham. By the time they had reached Hammerpots, where the smithy stands, and the roads divide to Coarsehorne and Churchsettle, they were all chattering happily and eagerly in voices that had broken their last bonds.

"Well, I like him," said Clara.

"How can you tell?" said Laura, "in that short time?"

"Oh, by his manner—his way. I should think he'd be kind. Mother, we must be sick and have him to call."

"Very well, my dear," she laughed good-humouredly, "which of us is it to be?"

"Not me," said Laura.

"It needn't be any of the family. What about Dixter? Dixter, should you like to be ill and have Dr Green to come and see you?"

"I'd sooner have the Goody, mistress."

"Oh, she'd kill you, I reckon, with her herbs and mud. You'd much better have the doctor, and he'll give you proper medicine."

"When is it to be, mistress? I ain't got break nor ache just now."

"It needn't be till next week. That will be soon enough. Then you shall fall out of the loft and break your leg."

"Oh, mistress, I'd be scared to do that. I might fall on my head and break that instead, and then neither the doctor nor the goody could help me."

"Clara, for shame! Stop teasing the poor boy!" cried Mrs Blazier—"after all we needn't none of us be sick. What's to stop us asking the doctor around to spend a pleasant evening?"

The girls agreed that there was nothing at all.

"But we must have company to meet him," said Laura, "it wouldn't be much treat for him with only us there."

"It's a pity the haying's over," said Mrs Blazier, "we could have asked him to the supper. Now there's nothing till harvest."

"Oh, don't let's invite him to a farm supper. He wouldn't care for that. You know how noisy and vulgar they can sometimes be. Let's just have a few friends and some music—we could ask the Peascods. . . ."

"*I* know how noisy and vulgar *they* can sometimes be," mocked Clara.

"Not at an evening party—only when they're larking about among themselves. And Susan could sing for us."

"Her songs are only common songs."

"They're country songs—the doctor might like them."

"And you'd like to sit with Saul Peascod in a corner."

"How dare you!"

"Well, it's true, ain't it?"

"No, it ain't. Saul Peascod's nothing to me."

§2

An hour later Laura was in the field—the high field that, swelling between them, prevents the windows of Coarsehorne from looking out to the windows of Churchsettle. The two farms lay below her, before and behind, each in its red huddle of barns. Coarsehorne was a little more trim than Churchsettle, a rosy four-square building, with white-rimmed windows staring like eyes. But though more trim it looked less prosperous. Its walls

were smarter than its hedges, its gardens better cultivated than its fields. Laura looked back towards it—then she ran forward, down to Churchsettle.

Twilight was already in the fold, though in the field the light had still been flushed and high. An orange glow streamed from the kitchen window, where the lamp was set. Laura tapped on the door and went in.

“Well, Susan.”

“Well, Laura.”

Susan looked up, and stood holding her rolling-pin upon the board. Her arms were floury to the elbows, and there was a smudge of flour on her hot, bright face.

“What are you making?”

“An apple turnover for supper.”

“It looks good.”

“It will be good, I reckon. How are you, dear?”

“Oh, I’m well enough. What d’you think, Susan? We’ve been to call on Dr Green.”

“To call?”

“Yes, to pay a call. All of us—leastways Clara and Mother and me—drove up in the trap with Dixter. I told you we’d always meant to do it.”

“And why should you do it?”

“Because it’s the proper thing.”

“I never knew that. I thought the proper thing was for the doctor to call and see you—when you’re poorly, that’s to say.”

“You aren’t very friendly, Susan. Why should we see the poor man only when we’re sick? I hear he’s un-

accountable lonesome. His Bottom was telling our Dexter. Now we can ask him to an evening party."

"And couldn't you have done that before?"

"No, not before we'd paid an afternoon call on him."

Susan nodded gravely at her rolling-pin.

"Well, I live and learn."

The door suddenly opened, and a young man stood on the threshold, half in lamplight, half in twilight.

"Hullo, Saul."

"Hullo, my darling."

She drew her brows together to condemn his salutation. But quite unabashed he strolled forward.

"Coming out?"

"I don't think so—not just yet, anyhow."

"I shan't be here later. I'm going to see Copland at Fairhazel."

"Well, I can't come now."

"You'd better."

"I tell you I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm talking to Susan."

"Ha-ha! That's good."

He put out his hand and gripped hers, pulling her towards the door.

"Let go, Saul."

But he didn't, and she had to follow him, partly because her pride revolted from a struggle, partly because her love was urging her out into the falling dusk, into

the muted lights and sounds, to meet the rush of the night-wind and the kiss of night.

The door shut behind them, and their world changed suddenly from gold to silver. Her lover's face seemed to fade from her in the changed light, though it had actually stooped nearer. She put up her hands against the wall of his breast.

"Why do you joke me like that in front of Susan. It isn't fair."

"And why shouldn't I joke you in front of Susan or anyone else?"

"I don't want her to know all about us."

"As if that mattered!"

"It does."

"Well, they'll all have to know someday."

"I'm not so sure."

"I am."

The wall had fallen on her and crushed her. She was shut into darkness, into the storm of his kisses. At first she struggled, beating him with the hands that were like imprisoned birds between them, then suddenly she went limp, like a girl drowned.

§3

They were sitting in the barn, on a pile of straw laced and filigreed with the light of the new moon shining through the high barn window. His face was patched with it, black and white like a clown's. His beauty was a

thing she felt rather than saw, as he sat with his arms about her, his heart beating against her side.

"My Laura, smile."

She smiled.

"That's good. That's more like you. Oh, you don't know how unaccountable sweet you look when you smile."

"Oh, Saul. . . ."

"What, my liddle dear?"

"You mustn't take too much for granted."

"I take nothing for granted that you haven't told me. You love me—you've told me so a dunnamany times."

"Maybe I have, but—oh, Saul, that's not enough."

"I reckon it's enough for me."

"But not enough for marriage."

"Now you're talking rubbish, liddle creature. I know there's a kind of love that ain't enough for marriage, but that love ain't ours. Our love's a kind of a love that asks to wed."

She sighed.

"When I think of you," he continued, "I think of us two together in our house, with the fire burning and the children round us, and you with your merry dark eye . . . oh, so friendly. . . ."

He fell to kissing her.

"But I can't, Saul dearest . . ." his kisses broke up her words but could not silence them—"that isn't how I think . . . I mean, I couldn't be happy . . . just like that . . . the sort of life you want isn't my sort."

"It's every woman's sort—husband and children and a lot more besides. Don't you think, my girl, I'll make just a mother and a housekeeper of you. You shall have all the fun and happiness you want—I'm a fine lover, as I've been told."

Curiously enough it pleased her rather than hurt her when he hinted at his experiences with other girls. She knew that many before her had caught him, but none had held him, as she had held him now for a year or more. He was fixed, he loved her with a love that asked to wed. Other girls envied her. And yet. . . .

"I couldn't. It isn't that I don't love you—But I—I don't want—I mean I reckon I'd make a poor wife for a farmer,"

"You'd make a valiant wife for a farmer. I know you want to be a lady, but that ain't the life for you, my lovely girl. Ladies are larmentable poor stuff, if only you'd see it. Being fine loses them all the best things they were made for."

"That's nonsense."

"It's you that's talking nonsense. I never heard the like. What else should you be but a farmer's wife, same as your mother?"

"My father's a gentleman."

"You've told me that before. Don't you say it again."

His voice had suddenly roughened with anger, and antagonism seemed to run from him to her through the arms that still held her and the heart that thudded against her.

"I shall say what's true."

"What's true is that your father's an honest yeoman the same as mine is proud to be; but you've been so stuffed with notions and bred above your place, that you put yourself where you don't belong and look down on everybody. Ain't that right?"

"No it ain't."

"You think that if you dress fine and speak as if you'd swallowed a nail, some gentleman ull come along and marry you. Now I tell you that he won't. Why should he? There ain't one to come, for one thing. We're all plain folks round here. You'd much better take what you can get—and though I say it, it ain't so bad. Church-settle's a sound farm—sounder than Coarsehorne, for all we boys ain't 'gentleman farmers.' There'll be enough money for your comforts and a bit over for treats. You'll be free and looked up-to, and you'll have a husband who'll love you and be true to you. I've been a bit wild now and then, but that was mostly my game, and I'm not the sort that goes on playing after marriage. I'll be a true and kind husband to you, liddle creature I love you—that's the best reason for it all; and the next best is that you love me."

"I don't know that I do."

"You've said that you do."

"Not enough to marry you."

"Then you love like a gipsy!"

"How dare you say that!"

"It's true—kisses without kindness."

She burst into tears. But he was too sore to comfort her. Instead he shook her in his arms.

"You've not played fair by me. You've let me kiss you and make love to you, and you knew what I was after. You should ought to have taken me or bid me go."

"I'm not the first girl you've kissed and made love to."

"I've told you the others were different."

She struggled out of his arms, which now were like a threat enfolding her. She knew that she had behaved badly, but she told herself miserably that she couldn't help it.

"Oh, Saul—let me be. Don't worry me like this. I don't know what I'm after. I do love you—I can't live without you. But why can't we go on as we are a little longer?"

"We've gone on for a year, and I tell you I'm getting tired. I'm a man, and I'm getting impatient. You'll have to make up your mind one of these days. And if you can't live without me, I reckon you're bound in rightness to yourself to live with me."

She sobbed for a moment or two.

"Will it do if I let you know by harvest?"

"Why then?"

"Because I shall have had time to think. I won't meet you in between whiles—save in the ordinary way, when we're in company. Will that do for you?"

"It won't do at all, but seemingly I've got no choice."

You've been unaccountable cruel and crooked to me, Laura Blazier."

She did not answer him, but walked out of the barn. He followed her.

"I'll take you home."

"No, no—I'd rather be alone."

"It's dark—you'll be afraid."

"I'm never afraid in the fields."

"Then you're a proper farmer's wife . . ." his voice came after her.

CHAPTER V

§ I

The Blaziers' evening party took place early in August. Dr Philip Green was their most honoured guest, first in a company of farmers. The Peascod brothers had all come over from Churchsettle with their cousin Sue. They sat in a row against the wall—Saul, Reuben, Mark, Aaron and Harry, dressed in their Sunday blacks and looking a little less than the splendid men they were. Their father would join them later, when he came back from an auction.

There were also present the Harmans from Great Streals, the Penhurst's from Widow's Farm, the Lardners from Little Worg, Young Mr and Mrs Luck from Ellenwhorne, and sons and daughters from Platnix and Fairhazel. They were all a little shy, a little awed by their best clothes and each other's company. For this was not in the common way of entertainments round Speldham. There would be big gatherings at sheep-shearing and at harvest, when much good beer would be drunk, and many barriers would go down, but this was a sort of genteel affair, where they were supposed to behave themselves and sit still. It was just like the Blaziers to

have changed the good old ways—it was part of the airs and graces they gave themselves at Coarsehorne. Joe Blazier wasn't a bad chap, but most of the company could remember his old dad and smile or spit, according to temperament, as they watched his wife and daughters.

When the doctor arrived the room was full, and very nearly silent. Young Harmans, Penhursts and Lardners sat stiffly among their elders, holding in their hands the glasses of port wine that were considered by the Blazier girls as more suitable than ale for such a party. In a corner of the room a girl was standing, and in spite of the change in her appearance due to a pink muslin gown, he recognised Susan Peascod. He had not seen her since his last visit to Harry, paid as long ago as May, and he was suddenly swept with a sense of her beauty as she stood there, crudely dressed up according to the traditions of a rustic holiday, but so glowing, so alive, so golden and red and brown, that the whole sweetness of a summer cornfield seemed there in the stuffy lamplight.

She was evidently just going to sing, for on his entrance she shook her head at her neighbours, smiled and sat down. Mrs Blazier came forward to greet him, followed by her daughters, who dragged up their father, a shy, slow fellow, evidently a little shame-faced in his own house.

"This is my father, Dr Green. He's so sorry he couldn't come with us when we paid our visit."

Laura was speaking, and she looked very demure and pretty in her blue tarletan dress.

"I'm sure you're welcome, Sir, to my house."

Joe Blazier shook hands. For years before him his fathers and grandfathers had owned Coarsehorne, and he'd been very proud of that till his town wife and daughters had insisted on his being proud of other things that he wasn't quite so sure about.

"Let me get you some refreshment"—"A glass of port wine."

Both Laura and Clara were speaking in their hard-ruled voices and as he looked at them he saw a glow that told him he had just brought the final triumph to their evening. The real taste and charm of their appearance stood out in that crowd of louts in Sunday blacks and strapping girls in cheap, gay muslin. . . .but somehow his eye roamed to the splash of pink that was Susan Peascod.

"I'm afraid my coming has interrupted you. Miss Peascod was going to sing."

"Oh, she can sing any time, can't you, Sue?"

"Please let her sing now. You will, won't you, Miss Peascod, or I'll feel awkward."

"Surely"—her smiling mouth rolled out unashamed the Sussex word. She seemed altogether to be without shame or shyness, for she stood up again quite simply, and sang unaccompanied in a voice that, though sweet, was untrained and untrue.

"Over the mountain and over the moor,
Hungry and barefoot I wander forlorn,

My father is dead and my mother is poor,
And she mourns for the day that will never return.
Pity, kind gentlemen, friends of humanity,
Cold blows the wind, and the night's coming on;
Give me some food for my mother in charity,
Give me some food and I then will be gone."

Normally all the young Harmans, Penhursts and Lardners would have joined noisily in the chorus, but the unaccustomed decorum of the evening had damped their voices into a croak.

"Call me not lazy-back beggar and bold enough,
Fain would I learn both to knit and to sew;
I've two little brothers at home, when they're old enough
They will work hard for the gifts you bestow."

Then suddenly a clear young bass swept into the music

"Pity, kind gentleman, friends of humanity"

It was Saul Peascod, unable any longer to refrain, sweeping away the gentilities that lay like an anti-macassar on the evening. His brothers followed his leadership, opened their mouths wide and the chorus roared. The song went triumphantly through about eighteen verses, and when for the last time everyone had shouted—

"Give me some food, and I then will be gone"

there was a round of clapping and a great stamping of feet.

"That was valiant, Sue!" cried Luck.

"Give us another," cried Ted Marchant from Platinix.

"Give us 'There was an old farmer' "—"Give us 'Hollering Pot.' "

Clara and Laura looked anxiously at their mother and at Dr Green. They wondered what he thought of so much noise . . . and some of Susan's songs were rather common—coarse, in fact.

"Perhaps we might have an interval for refreshments," said Mrs Blazier, reading the look on the dark face and the fair.

But nobody had been doing anything else but eat and drink all the evening, so her words made no appeal.

"Give us another song"—" 'There was an old farmer' "—" 'The Echoing Horn' "—

Susan obliged with both. Her young voice did not tire, nor did the other voices in the room. Dr Green was enjoying himself much more than he had expected, but he saw that his hostesses had not meant the evening to be spent so. Evidently Saul Peascod had offended—the doctor watched specially for any looks passing between him and Laura, he saw that while his were ardent, hers were cold, and that once she twitched her gown out of the hand the young man put out to detain her. She was a silly little cat, for he had changed her party from a

dull affair into a literally howling success. But perhaps the coldness between them had deeper springs.

“With bottle and friend
The evening we’ll spend,
To crown the bright sport of the day;
Our wives will at night
Give us great delight
And soothe all our sorrows away.”

Ellenwhorne, Great Streale, Platnix, Widow’s, Little Worge and Fairhazel roared together. Suddenly the door opened, and the wind blew in from a yellow moon hanging above the shoulder of Sam Peascod.

“Good evening, one and all. You wur making such a rumpus that you never heard my knock, so I made so bold as to walk in.”

“Had a good day, Fäather?” sang out young Mark.

“A middling good day—bought some harness and tools and a cart, that’s all. None of the beasts fit to look at.”

“You didn’t get the machine?”

“No. It wur broken and no good—never was much good, I reckon. Our arms ull have to work for us a bit longer.”

He sat down, and Clara offered him a glass of port.

“No, no, my dear—give me a longer drink than that, something that’ll do more’n fill a holler tooth. Your fäather brews some unaccountable good ale—fetch us

a glass of it. Reckon it's hot in here and you're all shut up like a Christmas party."

The singing seemed to have melted Clara a little—she ran and fetched the ale without affront. Peascod drank it off and called for another song. But Susan shook her head.

"I can't—I'm as hoarse as a frog."

"And can't no one else sing? You wur all making a just about fine noise when I came along."

"Joe Penhurst can sing."

"I'm hoarse too," said Joe.

"Reckon the whole lot of yer's spiling for a drink. This is a hot night for indoors. Here, neighbour Blazier, what do you say to us all going out and drinking your good health by moonlight? It's as soft a night as you'll get this Summer, and we might all go out and do a bit of drinking and a bit of dancing and a bit of courting and come to no harm."

§2

The Blaziers' party ended very differently from the way it had begun. It had begun in their crowded parlour, crammed with furniture and guests—it ended in the freedom of their farmsteading, where twenty people looked a scatter in the yellow moonlight. It had begun with difficult and halting conversation—it ended in an uproarious dance, to the tune of a fiddle that Blazier's stockman played in the barn. It had begun with nibbles

of cake and sips of port—it ended in brown draughts of home-brewed ale and the browsing of apples picked up in the orchard grass.. It had begun with the sexes rigorously separated in self-conscious clumps—it ended with couples straying happily down the dark ways of the garden or into the whispering shadows of Coarsehorne Wood.

Dr Green enjoyed himself enormously. At first he had been afraid that the girls' pleasure would be spoilt by the turn things had taken, and he liked them well enough to be sorry for them, silly as he thought them to be. But Laura and Clara, after some preliminary reluctance, also felt the benefit of the change. The first part of the evening had been an effort—a strain. The young Marchants and Lardners and Harmans, to say nothing of the young Peascods, had not adapted themselves to the ways of an evening party. No one could be expected to fight for gentility against such a dead weight of uncouthness. After all, the success of a party lay in the enjoyment of the guests, and if the guests could not appreciate a refined entertainment, then something clumsier must be provided, and the hostesses politely conceal their own preferences.

Thus they excused themselves to themselves as with bright eyes and flushed faces they ran in and out of the yellow light and the black shadows, as they laughed and panted and danced up the middle and down again. It was Sam Peascod who thought of sending for Ash the stockman and his fiddle. Ash played every year at the

hayng and the harvest home, both at Coarsehorne and Churchsettle. His fiddle jiggged out the old tunes, such as "Brighton Camp" and "Sir Roger de Coverley," and he had also learned some new ones, such as "See me Dance the Polka." The floor of the big barn had already been cleared for the harvest; all they had to do was to hang lanterns from the struts and open the door wide to the moon. The huge interior was a patchwork of darkness, moonlight and lantern-light, and the gay dresses of the dancers floated and shifted from light into shadow, from red light into yellow light, and back again into darkness.

Yes, it was better than the parlour, which had been insufferably close and hot. The night was balmy with scents, blowing on cool airs from unseen hedgerows. A beanfield over at Founthill breathed out its sweetness in sudden delicious gasps. It was like the scent of honey coming from the moon, which hung low above the fields between Coarsehorne and Churchsettle. As Laura sat under a rose tree in the garden, waiting for her partner, who had gone to fetch her a drink of small ale, the moon suddenly seemed wonderful and mysterious, a secret light hung out for her alone. She looked out to it and the radiance that swamped the fields, and her heart beat quickly, making a new response to the fields and the night—a response which was really a question whose answer was hid in the moon.

A man came towards her from the house, and at first she thought it was Charlie Copland of Fairhazel come

back with her ale. But as he drew nearer she saw it was Dr Green.

"Am I going to be allowed to dance with my hostess?"

Laura jumped to her feet, forgetting all about poor Copland.

"With pleasure," and she slid her hand into the offered crook of his elbow. He led her away to the tinkling barn.

A thought suddenly came to her.

"Can you dance the polka?"

"I've danced it occasionally in London, but you mustn't expect to find me an expert partner."

"Oh, let's have the polka, then. None of the other boys can dance it, so I'd like to have it with you."

She called out to Ash to play his polka. The fiddle halted and scraped, then swept into the new tune.

"See me dance the polka!

See me waltz around!

See my coat-tails flying

As I swing my partner round!"

The other dancers faltered and ebbed from the floor. They knew the tune, but not the dance, and were shy of displaying their ungainliness before the doctor and fine young Laura who could dance to London tunes. Only Susan Peascod and Joe Penhurst kept their feet, kicking and spinning amidst shouts and laughter.

"Don't let us be beaten, Joe," cried Susan with eyes

that danced more gaily than her feet, and cheeks that were pinker than her gown.

Laura felt ashamed of them, but it was only a light and painless emotion. Her heart was too full of its own pride to care much about any shadow of another's shame that might fall upon the evening. Here she was, the only girl of all the lot who could dance the polka, except poor Clara who hadn't a partner. Dr Green, in spite of his self-depreciation, danced easily and well. He complimented her on her dancing. Her feet flew. Her tarletan petticoats dipped and whirled. The doctor's coat-tails streamed out behind him. It might have been a London ball-room—if only there had been a proper gasolier instead of lanterns, and a band instead of Ash's fiddle, and a genteel company of dancers instead of Susan and Joe jumping about like lunatics. But anyway, here she was, dancing with Dr Green, who was a gentleman and had been to the University, whose hands were white and clean, whose clothes had been made at a tailor's instead of bought off a stall at a fair, who had a servant to open his front door, and who could dance the polka. Her petticoats swung. Her feet flew.

Saul Peascod watched her, leaning against the wall.

"Laura's enjoying herself," said Emma Marchant of Platnix, with whom he had been dancing before the polka began.

He nodded gloomily.

"She's got a partner she likes," continued Emma, not quite without malice.

Charlie Copland came up with the glass of ale he had fetched for Laura from the house.

"Here she is, then—and a fine time I've had hunting for her. She asked me to get her a glass of the small ale—and I had to go to the house for it, as there were naun outside but the strong. Then when I come back—"

"She wur off wud the doctor."

Young Bob Copland broke in with an outrageous laugh.

"That'll be her fancy now," said Reuben Peascod—"Cheer up, Saulie."

"I doän't care," said Saul, "she may have whom she likes fur all I care, and if she likes that pale-faced, spindle-shanked, ginger-headed swell, she's welcome to her own taste. I've got better—" and he put his arm round Emma Marchant's waist and gave her a smacking kiss before them all.

Emma boxed his ears, and the struggling and tumbling that took place nearly drowned the music.

"They're having some fun over there," said the doctor, who had only half seen.

Laura who had seen it all, bit her lip before she answered.

"It's only horse-play. Some of those young men are inclined to be rough."

They danced on. The doctor's coat-tails streamed out behind him. Laura's petticoats whirled. Her feet flew.

CHAPTER VI

§1

It was quite soon after harvest that Bottom, in the course of gossip, told the doctor that Laura Blazier had thrown over young Saul Peascod.

“Chucked him präaper so’s I understand, and he says he cares naught, and ull never take another look at her,”

“I’m sorry for that. She’s a pretty girl, and he’s a fine young fellow.”

“Ah, but she’s meaning better for herself. She looks down and sneers at being a farmer’s wife. She wants to marry a gentleman and ride in a carriage.”

He did not tell Dr Green that rumour said the young folk had quarrelled over Laura’s dancing with the doctor at her party—dancing with the doctor and dancing at Saul Peascod, seeing as one could dance the polka and the other couldn’t. Rumour also said that now the young lady had seen the gentleman she wanted and would try properly to get him and his carriage.

As it happened, Philip Green did wonder whether he had done anything to turn Laura’s feather head. He realised that she was just the girl to think a lot of his presence at her party and to be impressed by his very middling station. Perhaps he ought not to have danced with her so much, but at the moment he had thought

no harm. He would avoid her now, and perhaps in time she would learn sense and go back to her farmer.

This was an act of self-denial, for he still felt lonely when his day's work was done. The Taverner baby had been born, but its arrival had not had the result he had hoped. It was a delicate child, a boy, and its ailments, real and supposed, entirely absorbed Mrs Taverner, who would seldom leave it by day and never by night. Her husband had emancipated himself to the extent of an occasional evening, but he preferred to spend his freedom at the Chequers, where there was a billiard table. Dr Green occasionally joined him, and even once or twice went in alone for a drink and a game. But something in him doubted these tavern recreations—he saw the danger of sinking into peasantry. He knew that it was a fate that sometimes overtook the doctor and the parson in parishes where there was no society save the village inn.

More than once he told himself that Speldham was no place for an unmarried man. He ought to have thought of that before he took the practice, and chosen somewhere less isolated. The Old Un had been a widower for the last twenty years of his occupation, but the Old Un had had other resources. . . . Philip hoped he would never be driven to resources like the Old Un's. He must make the best of things. After all, it would be as well to give his evenings to study. He was cut off from the great medical world where science moved and discoveries were made. He could keep abreast of the times

only by reading. He bought such books as he could afford, and read the *Lancet* from cover to cover.

Early in October an invitation came from Coarsehorne to another evening party. He declined it, but made up his mind that he would accept the next. He had stopped away long enough to show Miss Laura that he had no "intentions"—if she had ever thought he had any—and to allay gossip. There was no reason why he should permanently deny himself the only approximation to social life that Speldham offered. He must not risk becoming either a peasant or a recluse. Perhaps in time other opportunities would arise and he would cease to depend entirely on the Blaziers. Lord Rushfurlong might condescend to take occasional notice of an educated man, and on the other hand, some of his farming neighbours might lose their suspicion of the "furriner," and invite him to a haying or a harvest-home. He had been disappointed because that year he had received no invitations to these local feasts, even from farms where he had worked hard to alleviate the pains of life and death. But Bottom told him that it was because he was a newcomer, and must not expect it.

"And how long will it be before I can expect it?"

"I dunno, Mäaster. It might be next year—it might be ten years hence."

"Good Lord! Is there really a chance of my being treated as a stranger for ten years?"

"It depends on yourself, Mäaster. I knew a Parson over at High Tilt, who passed as a furriner all his life.

As soon as they got to know him a bit, he'd do something 'furrin' and they'd have to start all over again. But I don't think you'll find it so hard as that, Sir."

"I'm sure I hope not. It's deuced dull for me, never getting into a house unless there's someone ill in it. I'm not an old man, Bottom, and I feel I'd like a bit of fun and company now and then."

"Well, Sir," said Bottom—"there's always Gunpowder Plot day."

§2

The Fifth of November was a great day in Speldham. From olden times it had been celebrated in a manner that left Christmas but a twilight feast. For weeks before the villagers and farmers paid money into the Bonfire Club, which provided the Guy and the gunpowder and the fireworks, as well as costumes for the Bonfire Boys. When evening came, the householders of the High Street and Cackle Street put up their shutters, and the old and timorous stayed at home. Squibs, crackers and fizzigs exploded everywhere, blazing barrels rolled down the street, and midnight culminated in a solemn torchlight procession bearing the Guy to his bonfire on Speldham Green.

The Bonfire Boys were the young males of the district dressed as Warriors. Red Indians, Zulus, Hindus, Beef-eaters, Cossacks, Cooks, Ladies of Quality, Dancing Bears, Arabs, Nursemaids—in any style their mothers,

sisters and wives could create out of a few yards of calico. The guy was generally some public character who had captured the local imagination—Palmer the poisoner and Mrs Dyer the baby farmer had both been dragged to a supplementary execution on Speldham Green. Daniel O'Connell had suffered impartially with Lord Palmerston, Mr Gladstone with Mr Disraeli. But to be a guy was not necessarily a sign of disgrace, and within living memory the Duke of Wellington and the Prince Consort had both been burned as a popular tribute. This year the guy was an Irishman and a Fenian, Michael Barrett, whose execution had been Englishmen's last chance of seeing a man hanged. Speldham was not very sure what an Irishman looked like, and finally poor Mike made his appearance in a clown's mask, a Highlander's bonnet, and an old coat belonging to the landlord of the Chequers.

Philip Green went out about six o'clock. From the beginning of dusk there had been a splutter of squibs under his window, as the impatient youth of Speldham anticipated darkness. But it was not till the sky was black and all the stars were out that the Bonfire Boys came sweeping into the town. They had assembled at the Drill Hall of the Rifle Volunteers, and marched in procession, carrying torches that lit up the savageries and ribaldries of their costumes and their big boots swinging under burnous, blanket or petticoat alike. They carried the guy in their midst, and sang as they marched the time-honoured songs of the Day:

“Remember, remember, the Fifth of November,
Gunpowder treason and plot.
I see no reason why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot.”

“A halfpenny loaf to feed the Pope,
A penn’orth of cheese to choke him,
A gallon of ale to wash it down
And a great big fire to roast him.”

The doctor stood under the Chequers wall and watched them as they swung by. Their tramp shook the ground, and every now and then they shouted dreadfully “Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!” Their column was edged with a crackle of small fireworks as the village boys ran beside them, envying their greatness, and looking forward to the time when they too should be Bonfire Boys, and march splendidly through Speldham. The girls appeared along the streets, wrapped in cloaks and huddling together, squealing at the fireworks, but with eyes boldly searching the procession for eyes they knew.

The Peascod boys were naturally there. Dr Green recognised Harry and Reuben dressed as Turks, Mark as a Highlander, Aaron as a nursemaid with a pillow baby huddled in his arms, and Saul as a Cossack with a hat made out of a muff. When it had reached Speldham Green, the procession circled round the spot where faggots and tar-barrels were laid for the bonfire, and then marched back up the High Street and the Cackle Street to the Drill Hall. Here more tar-barrels were in wait-

ing, and these were set alight and rolled down the hill.

Then the fun began. The Bonfire Boys came charging after the barrels, and the air was full of flames and screams. Prudent folk ran indoors, and had buckets of water and buckets of sand ready to put out any fire that might be started, as the barrels bounced and burst. A bush was set on fire in a cottage garden, and the blaze, with the blazing tar-barrels, made Speldham street a fiery street, full of leaping light and darkness.

The doctor watched it all sweep past, then turned into his house. He was not the man for riot and horseplay, and besides, he guessed that he would be wanted in the surgery before the night was over. The Old Un had always done a roaring trade on Gunpowder nights, so Bottom had told him.

§3

But on the whole the casualties were not so numerous as might have been expected from the danger and the noise. A little boy had his eyebrows singed off by a rocket, a young man broke a finger in a fight, and a young woman was knocked over and bruised—that was all. The doctor was allowed to eat his supper in peace and afterwards decided to move upstairs to the drawing-room. It had not been necessary to close the shutters on the first floor, so he could look out and watch the fun.

“If anyone calls, Mrs Conney, put them straight into the surgery, and come and tell me.”

The scene from the window was an unreal Speldham lit up by Bengal lights. Every now and then a green brilliance would sweep over the cottages, making them like cottages in a dream—then it would all flash from green to blinding yellow, and from yellow burn to crimson. He saw figures running to and fro—there was shouting and singing and fighting. Sometimes the fights were real, the quarrel of strong drink, sometimes they were mere fun and horseplay between gangs of rival youths. The light was too freakish for him to recognise faces, but he had been told by one of his patients that the young Peascods were the terror of High Street and Cackle Street. Linked arm in arm, they swooped down the village, blazing their trail through the crowd with detonators and monster crackers. The street was full of explosions and screams. It seemed astonishing that the surgery was empty.

Then as he looked down he saw a little knot of people at his door. Just that part of the roadway was in darkness, screened by the gable jut of the Chequers, so he could not distinguish faces, but two figures seemed to be supporting another that tottered limply between them. Then came a ring at the surgery bell. He heard Mrs Conney go to the door and then the sound of footsteps in the hall. Half-regretfully, for he was idly enjoying his view of the fun, he tore himself from the window, and met his housekeeper on the stairs.

"It's Miss Laura Blazier—she's fainted in the crowd, and they've brought her in here."

Laura Blazier! What a harassing coincidence! He had

banished her till Christmas, and here she was in his house. Life had mocked his plans with a sudden, defiant gesture. As he hurried into the surgery, it occurred to him to wonder whether the gesture had not come from Laura herself.

Three women in dark cloaks were huddled together on the horse-hair sofa. Laura was in the midst, partly supported by Susan Peascod, while her sister rubbed her hands. Her eyes were closed and her bonnet had fallen sideways, showing strands of loose, dark hair. Her face was white, but with the clear, soft whiteness that was usual to it—not the dirty whiteness of a swoon.

“Oh, Dr Green, my poor sister has fainted!”

Clara rose anxiously, while Susan looked down at the dishevelled head on her knee.

“We got into a tur’ble crowd on the green, and the boys were charging up and down, and the gunpowder going off, and reckon it was all too much for her.”

He stooped and felt her pulse. It was a trifle quick, but otherwise normal.

“Did you carry her here, or did she walk?”

“She hopped along between us. It was only a few yards. But she’s right off now.”

Not she! But he proceeded to treat her as if she were. He told Clara to loosen her collar and stays, and held a bottle of smelling-salts to her nose. She coughed and started up.

“What is it? What’s happening?”

“You’re in Dr Green’s surgery,” said Clara—“Susan

and I brought you in when you fainted. How do you feel?"

"Oh. . . I dunno Oh, oh, I'm scared."

She huddled down against Susan, hiding her face.

The doctor handed her a glass of sal volatile.

"Sip that slowly—it'll pull you round."

He watched her as she did so. She had certainly not fainted, but he could see that she was genuinely frightened and upset. No doubt Speldham was a rough place tonight for such as she.

"You'll soon be quite all right, Miss Blazier. Don't hurry or alarm yourself. You're not really ill."

"But I don't want to go out again—Susan, I can't go back."

"No, why should you? You've had enough, I reckon."

"I want to go home."

"That would be the best thing to do," interposed Philip. "Go home—and go to bed at once."

"But I don't see how I can. The trap's at the Chequers, and Lord knows where Dixter's got to by now. We shan't find him till after the bonfire."

"I'll find Dixter," said Susan Peascod.

"Do you think you could?"

"He's somewhere in the two streets, I reckon."

The patient seemed to be reviving marvellously at the thought of home.

"You're a kind girl, Susan, and I'll be unaccountable grateful . . . but you mustn't go alone. Clara must go with you."

"And a valiant lot of use Clara ull be to me! I'm not afraid and I'll be better with only myself to look after."

"But she must go—it wouldn't be safe for you alone. If you won't have her, I'll go instead.—"

"Don't talk a gurt lot of nonsense. I don't want neither of you."

Laura threw herself back on the sofa, holding her handkerchief to her mouth, and nearly crying.

"I tell you, I won't stay here with Clara—I'll be sick with worry, thinking of you alone . . . and you'll never find Dixter, neither."

Here the doctor again intervened.

"I really think Miss Blazier's right, and you'd better take Miss Clara. This isn't a night for a woman to be out alone, and you're more likely to find the boy if there's two of you searching. I'd come myself, only I mustn't leave my surgery."

Then he suddenly wished he hadn't spoken, but had left Susan to take her luck in the perils of Speldham street; for though Laura still held the handkerchief to her lips, he could see a smile behind it.

But he was too late.

"Maybe you're right," said Susan standing up and tying her bonnet-strings, "Laura will be safe enough. Come along, Clara, or reckon Dixter may have got too far to find."

"And can Laura wait here?"

"Of course she can. Or rather, she'd better wait up-

upstairs. There's a fire in the drawing room, and a patient might be shown in here at any moment."

This seemed the best plan, and they helped Laura upstairs, and laid her on a sofa by the drawing room fire. Then the doctor showed out his visitors into a baleful green street, and went and sat alone in his fireless study. He could not forget that smile which he had seen, and it kept him away from the fire.

§4

A few minutes later another patient called—this time a lad with two front teeth knocked out, who kept him busy for a quarter of an hour. Then he went back to the chills of his study, and hoped that Clara and Susan would find Dixter without much more delay. He wondered whether he ought to go up and look at Laura—she had not been quite normal, though her faint was certainly a myth and probably a snare. But he decided that he had better keep out of the way. Solitude was best for her and safest for him.

Then suddenly he heard a faint movement in the house, an opened door, a creak, a step on the stairs. . . . He sat up, listening—finally stood up, and was standing when she came into the room.

"Miss Blazier!"

She had evidently tidied her hair before the drawing-room mirror, for it was now pushed back demurely un-

der her bonnet. Her cheeks had a light flush in them, sunset upon snow, but she stood before him meekly, her eyes cast down, her hand on the knob of the open door.

"I'm sorry, Miss Blazier—they haven't come back yet. But you should have stayed upstairs."

In spite of his efforts, there was more anger in his speech than was justified by the mere concern of a physician.

"I know they aren't back, but I want to speak to you."

She came a step or two further into the room and closed the door. Her demure persistence drove his anger past discretion.

"If you've come to tell me that your faint was no faint at all," he cried, "then you're wasting your time. I knew at once, as any doctor would."

She seemed a little abashed.

"I—I—Of course I hadn't fainted right away, but I felt very sick in the street—very sick and scared. . . . I—I can't stand noise and—roughness. And I wanted to see you anyway . . . to ask you why you've been keeping away from us."

"This beats everything!" he thought, but all he uttered was a lie.

"I haven't been keeping away from you, Miss Blazier."

"You didn't come to our party."

"I was engaged."

"Then why did Kit Bournier find you at home when he called to fetch you to Ghazel Sloop?"

Philip coloured.

"You seem minutely informed as to my doings."

"I could scarce help being informed as to this one," she said with a bitter smile, "for Kit first made sure you'd be with us, knowing we'd asked you, and called for you at Coarsehorne; and the next day he said he found you at home, smoking your pipe with your feet in your slippers. He thought it queer you hadn't come to us."

He could not speak before he had swallowed his annoyance at Speldham's ways.

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I appear very rude. But a doctor's often a very tired man of an evening. I remember now that I didn't go out, but stopped at home and rested. Please don't take the matter personally."

"I can't help it."

Her voice faltered, and he saw her sway. His anger suddenly turned against himself as he realised that the man in him had overruled the doctor.

"Come and sit here, Miss Blazier. I don't know what I've been thinking about, letting you stand so long."

He took her arm and guided her to the easy chair. Somehow the warmth of her soft arm through her sleeve, made him fail and change towards her. She felt a delicate creature, and yet something more . . . a lily and a flame.

As she lay back with her head on the cushion, he realised that he was still holding her arm. With an effort

he dragged his fingers from their too sweet pressure. He must take care.

"I know you think I'm very silly, Dr Green," she said slowly.

"Not silly"—though he still did so—"but I'm sorry I hurt you. I certainly didn't mean it."

"I know it was nothing—just to refuse an invitation. But you see . . . things are sometimes very queer—very difficult for me and Clara. . . . Oh, can't you understand? Can't you see how it hurts when you were brought up to call yourself a lady—and sent to school like a lady, to be with other ladies . . . and then you come back, and you see your father isn't really a gentleman at all—least-ways he doesn't behave like one. And then you're just one of a rough neighbourhood like ours, and know you've no chance of marrying anybody but a rough husband . . . and then somebody comes along who really is genteel—somebody like yourself . . . and you see he looks down on you and doesn't want to know you and—and won't come near you, and you—and you. . . ."

Her sobs choked her at last, and she hid her face in the cushions.

"Oh, don't talk like that. You mustn't. It isn't true. I don't look down on you. How could I? For one thing I've no right. Hang it all, I'm nothing to boast of. I don't come like you of a race of yeomen who've had their place for hundreds of years."

"Our folk have had Coarsehorne three hundred years.

But what difference does that make if we don't really count as gentry?"

"I should have thought it made all the difference in the world."

"Well, it doesn't. The families round here are so rough . . . they won't even call Dad a gentleman farmer. Not one of them's been educated—there's no one for an educated girl to know. But I'd thought you and I could be friends. You seemed to like us when you came to Coarsehorne."

"I did like you. I do like you."

"That's hard to believe when you've kept away ever since."

For a moment he thought of telling her why he had kept away, but shyness restrained him. He mumbled instead—

"I'm very sorry. You must forgive me . . . you must ask me again."

"If I do I expect you'll be engaged."

"I shan't be—I swear it."

"You can bring your pipe and your slippers."

Her soft eyes looked up into his—tears had not spoilt them, and suddenly he felt strangely, dangerously happy.

"Be sure I shall come. You know, I can't bear the thought of having hurt you, and I'd never have—"

The sound of wheels brought him abruptly to his senses.

"That must be your trap."

He knew that he had been saved from at least an indiscretion, and yet he felt disappointed. He wanted to go on talking, explaining, justifying himself to her. But he had enough command of himself to take the deliverance offered. He opened the study door, and the next moment Clara was in the room, flustered and panting.

"Thank goodness! Here I am at last. We've been all over the town, looking for that wretch. And then he must turn sulky and take half the night getting the trap. Now, if you please, Susan's gone off with Harry. She was always the girl for larking about with the boys."

"Poor Clara! She's left you to come home with me. But never mind if you don't want to come. I'm sure I can go alone."

"Oh, no, I tell you. I've had enough. My gown's in pieces."

"But you want to stay. You'll want to see the bonfire. I'm sure I'm well enough to drive alone."

Her eyes were on the doctor as she spoke, soft, inviting. But he had recovered all his strength, and saw the snare.

"I really think Miss Clara better go with you. You oughtn't to go alone, and as I've told you, I can't leave my surgery tonight. I expect there will be time to come back again for the bonfire."

"Oh, I don't want to do that. As I said, me and my gown have had about enough. Hurry up, Laura. Old Brutus won't stand for ever with fireworks popping off all around."

CHAPTER VII

§I

For some days the doctor's thoughts of Gunpowder Plot night were a mixture of bewilderment and a queer, anxious shame. The shame was a part of the bewilderment, for sometimes he scarcely knew what he was ashamed of. Was it his surrender to what he recognised as mainly a physical attraction? Or was it the realisation that he had hurt Laura Blazier, added to the burden of outrage borne by her sensitive heart? Sometimes he thought it must be that—and yet why should he blame himself? He had merely acted discreetly, and she had stamped on his discretion. The injury was his, not hers. But deep in his mind lay uncertainty. He began to wonder now whether his discretion had been for her alone—had there been no motive of self-protection in it? Was the flame that tormented him merely one of the many fires of Gunpowder Night, or had it been kindled earlier, on the night of an August moon?

He could not tell. He knew only that he was tormented. His professional experience gave him sometimes a queer sense of detachment. He saw his case as that of a man suffering from loneliness, from social and

sexual starvation, a man to whom he would in his professional capacity have recommended a change of environment and a congenial mixed society. Physician heal thyself.

But he could not carry out his own prescription. It would be impossible as well as ridiculous to leave Speldham at the end of the first year. He had scarcely begun to work up the practice, and if he sold it now he would not realise enough to buy anything better. He must wait till he had made it flourish then he could sell it at a price that would enable him to buy something really superior—in Bulverhythe, perhaps, or Hastings.

Yet as he planned this he realized quite definitely that he did not want to leave Speldham. Apart from his loneliness, he liked the work. It was varied and interesting, and it was work that cried out to be done. Sometimes his blood grew hot when he thought of the years of tyrannous neglect these simple souls had endured. Their gratitude for his attendance, for his patience in waiting for their difficult money, their surprise at his gentle handling and at the relief he brought to pain, roused both his tenderness and his indignation. His duty was to them—he must give up the next ten years at least to their service, not only in sick-rooms but in committee-rooms, not only with physic and lancet but with bricks and mortar and drain-pipes. It would be a poor thing to forego the thrills of pioneering for a fashionable physician's clinical insincerities.

No . . . of course from a perfectly abstract and im-

personal point of view he ought to marry. Marriage would give him the companionship he needed, the domestic interest, would save him from the perils of solitude and yet preserve him in the work he had chosen. He could afford to marry—the practice brought in enough for that, and was bringing in more month by month as the work increased. All he lacked was a bride. He cursed the shyness that had kept him from women, when he might have had his choice. There had been pretty and kindly nurses at St Hugh's—he remembered them in a vague, wistful way. A hospital nurse would have made an admirable wife for a doctor in his position. But it was too late now. He saw that he had been improvident—not only because he was a bachelor, but because he was ignorant of women. Combined with his medical knowledge of himself as a case was a psychological ignorance that left him lost and terrified in a profound shyness. He did not know what to do—beyond giving himself a prescription that he could not follow.

He both exaggerated and underestimated his danger. On one side he saw solitude diabolically threatening him, on the other he saw no special threat in Laura Blazier—she was merely a shame. She made him feel awkward and ashamed of himself, but not afraid. He was afraid of the loneliness that had made his heart a prey to his imagination, but he was not afraid of that heart itself, nor of the image set up in it.

As might have been expected he sought his first refuge in work. There was plenty to be done in those cold short

days. A week of storming rain, followed by the flooding of the Rother at Salehurst and of its tributary the Speldham Brook, brought an early return of the rheumatism and the ague from which the neighbourhood suffered in winter. There was also the annual increase of consumptive cases, the decline with the year. Though the country folk of Speldham mostly lived and worked in the open air, phthisis was always rampant among them, owing to the crowding at night in stuffy bedrooms. Any indoor ventilation was entirely accidental, and the doctor fought a losing battle with windows which were not even built to open.

"It's death," a mother at Rat Farm protested when he ordered fresh air for her gasping son—"his father died of his lungs before him, and the Old Un he ordered sand bags to be put along the winder and the door."

Even in cottages where his directions were obeyed, he had an uneasy feeling that windows were shut directly after he left and opened only when his horse's head was next seen in the lane. The local traditions of nursing were strong, and involved an almost total deprivation of air, food and water. He could see that he was regarded as a dangerous innovator when he ordered cool drinks to fever and good meals to consumption. Many of his patients still believed in the remedies of cupping and blood-letting, and many more in evil-smelling brews the ingredients of which read like the contents of the witches' caldron in *Macbeth*.

But one aspect of the doctor's ministrations, though

newfangled was appreciated, and that was his treatment of maternity cases. On his arrival he found birth less accounted of medically than death. The Old Un's characteristic objection to being disturbed o' nights and his reluctance to attend any cases that was not desperate, had resulted in the paradox that while the old and the incurable were watched out of the world by a physician helpless to do more than soothe their passing, the newborn either entered it unattended or were ushered by some old woman stuffed with ignorance and old wives' tales.

At the start Dr Green had found a certain reluctance to send for him. The attendance of a doctor was considered an unsuitable novelty, and was strenuously resisted by the midwife. But in this case he knew he had only to start to be allowed to go on. He announced that his charges for maternity cases would be less than for others, and that he would ask nothing extra for coming out at night. It was perhaps fortunate that some of his first confinements were difficult and involved the use of chloroform. The drug had never before been seen in the district, and was even outside the knowledge of all save those who for some cause had been operated on at the Sussex County Hospital. Immediately his fame spread.

"Surelye, I'd never have thought it could happen" said the young wife of the farmer of Doucegrove Farm—"there was I in my labour and beginning to cry out. 'Sniff this,' says he, and gives me the stuff in a tumbler. I sniffed, and would you believe it, Mrs Boorman,

but that very next minute I wur down in our pasture by the brook, watching old Cheese and her calf. I says 'pity the calf's such a little 'un, it can scarce holler'—and I heard its little bleat come out all thin and squinny—and would you believe it, they wur holding out my boy to me, and him shouting präaper."

He soon found that he had achieved a definite fame. In some quarters there were heart searchings and quotations from Canesis—indeed a visiting Methodist preacher delivered a sermon on the text "in sorrow shalt thou bring forth." But the Church itself was too busy cataloguing texts under Elotristic and Jahvistic headings to trouble about their practical application, and such opposition as there was came mostly from elderly men, who scarcely mattered in a situation like this. The doctor felt encouraged: in his first year he had at least transferred the local emphasis from death to birth.

§2

It was a hard life hither and thither. His three horses began to feel their work, and Bottom's complaints rose piteously as the trap and his coachmanship were required.

"Reckon the Old Un ud drive himself. Mostly he rode, but when he druv, he druv with his own hands, and never thought of dragging out poor old Bottom."

"Poor old Bottom spent last night in bed, which is more than the doctor did. I was over at Merriment's—a seven mile ride both ways—and I'm tired out this

morning. If you drive me to Platnix, at least I can have a nap on the way."

"You could do that on horseback, Sir—leastways if you rode Mus' Trimmer."

"And wake up in the nearest Private Bar—no, thanks. Besides, Mus' Trimmer's as tired as I am. I'll take the mare."

It was not easy to sleep in the trap—untyred wheels bumping in the ruts of unmade roads—none the less the doctor achieved it; woke up at Platnix, saw his patient, climbed back into the trap and went to sleep again—arriving home to find an urgent summons to Alehouse Farm eight miles in the opposite direction.

This time Bottom was spared, the cob was saddled, and Philip rode off, bound to keep awake. He was quite used to such a day's work—indeed it was almost a relief that the summons had come from eight miles the opposite way. Sometimes it happened that after a long ride to and from some distant hamlet he found a messenger awaiting him from a farmhouse he had passed on the road.

It was difficult to picture himself at St Hugh's—the house surgeon whose patients were under one roof . . . whose patients now were scattered like flies in a spider's web of twisting lanes—the zealous disciple of Lister, working in the immaculacy of the new white science . . . who last night had operated for hernia by the light of a candle the labourer's wife held over the bed. How different Winter used to be in the hospital wards with

the roaring fires, in the doctors' common-room with its pipe-smoke and good company, and in the streets cheery with gaslight and Christmas trade—how different from this waste of leafless country, lying grey under a grey sky, or sometimes almost sinisterly white under one of the rare snow flurries of the south. The lights of the London streets were like the stars of the Milky Way, all clouds and clusters, while the lights of the country lanes were like those rare, sparse constellations of the northern sky, where Pegasus and Andromeda lie spread upon a huge darkness.

It was past two o'clock when he returned from Alehouse Farm. He had just time to swallow some bread and cheese before mounting Trimmer to make the round of his regular cases, scheduled for today's attendance. Then he had hopes of a few hours' rest before the surgery opened. He would go upstairs and lie down on his bed. He had slept in it scarcely four hours last night, and only three the night before. He owed himself a better nap than that which he had snatched bumping over the ruts to Platnix. But as he rode up Speldham street an ominous sight confronted him—Mrs Conney peering out into the dusk, evidently watching for his return. He must have been sent for once again. Well, damn it all, he wouldn't go!

"It's from Ellenwhorne, Sir. They've sent one of their men, and he says it's urgent."

"It'll have to be if it gets me out again this evening."

"You look ever so tired. Still, you speak to him, Sir. He's waiting in the surgery."

A young ploughboy told an alarming tale. "The old mäaster"—father of Luck of Ellenwhorne—"had been täaken bad in his heart—all bent double over one side—shaking tur'ble and gasping like a fowl. Mäaster and Missus were präaperly scared. Would doctor come at wunst, or he'd be dead."

The symptoms, though vague, seemed alarming, and in spite of the vow he had made in the first defiance of fatigue and disappointment, Philip felt he could not refuse to go. So once again he swung astride his horse, who had carried him only eight miles or so this afternoon, and was therefore well able to take him the extra six to Ellenwhorne and back.

The farm stood between Sedlescombe and Brede, on the wooded slope above the Brede River. Scared faces met him at the drive gate and in the doorway.

"It's fäather—reckon a tur'ble thing has happened. Come quickly, doctor."

Thus the farmer led him to the kitchen, where an old man sat bent almost double, clutching his side.

"We dusn't put him to bed upstairs—for fear it moves agäun."

"It's his heart," whispered the farmer's wife.

"It's my heart," croaked the old man, his head almost down to the hearthstone. "*Doctor, my heart's turned over.*"

Philip stared at the ruddy old face, twisted with fear,

but not showing the lightest symptom of heart disease.

"Your heart! Let's have a look."

"I duren't move!" cried the old fellow. "I duren't move. I'm holding her. I've got her tight, or maybe she'd turn over again, and then I'd die."

"But you're holding your right side. Your heart isn't there at all."

"Not there!"

All the company stared at him, confused.

"No, certainly not there." Philip felt his anger rise as he thought of his three mile ride, and the rest and the pipe he had foregone. "Your heart's on the left side, and there's nothing the matter with it whatever, I'll be bound. You've brought me out on a tired horse at the end of a hard day's work all for" . . . his anger failed as suddenly as it had risen. He took out his stethoscope.

"Well, let's have a look at you, anyway."

"But I dursn't let go."

"I swear that nothing will happen to you if you let go. There's your heart—feel it," and he guided the gnarled old hand to the source of its life.

"Well, if that doän't beat all. . . ."

Doubtfully and distrustfully. Grandfather Luck loosened his grip, and then as no internal disaster followed, slowly dragged himself upright. The doctor sounded him carefully, found nothing wrong, and somehow managed to laugh.

"You'll live to be a hundred with a heart like that—but don't send for me too often just to tell you so."

“Well, if that doän’t beat all. . . . But I could have swore she turned over. I felt her go, and I cotched her as she turned—and I’ve held her these three mortal hours till I’m as stiff as stone. You’ll never tell me it wur naun—Maybe some folks carry their hearts on different sides. We äun’t all mäade alike—I’ve seen a chickun hatched out wud four legs. . . .”

Young Luck and his wife were apologetic. It had never struck them that Grandfather wur holding his wrong side, or maybe they wouldn’t have sent in such a hurry. They’d been scared with all the queer things the old man said and the pains he said he had, and they’d ordered Batup off without thinking. Now they were unaccountable sorry, and wouldn’t the doctor take a draught of their October beer?

He accepted, for he was cold with fatigue and the winter’s night then he rode off, wondering whether there would be time to have any sleep before the surgery opened. He felt revived by the ale, but suddenly sick of himself and sick of his job . . . the ignorance, the folly. . . . The dark night lay starless upon the fields, the silence beat down on him, shutting him into the tiny world of sound made by the clop of his horse’s hoofs upon the lane. He rode through a lonely country back to a lonely house. He wanted company more than ever after tonight’s deed—company that would join him in laughing at it, as it ought to be laughed at. But there was no company for him—save, perhaps at the Chequers. . . . He would go in to the Chequers for an hour

before the surgery opened. To sleep for so short a time would merely be to drug his brain; he had better keep awake—in good company. He must forget the common room and the surgeon's talk at St Hugh's. All men were equal over a glass of ale. More ale? He had already had all he needed till supper-time. He mustn't start the habit of an hourly glass. . . . But if he went to the Chequers he would have to drink like other men. He really had better not go. . . . But what else was he to do when he wanted company?

Among the fields on his left was a splash of light—a star hanging before the black curtain of Coarsehorne Wood. It was the kitchen window of Coarsehorne, red with lamplight, the sign of better company than the sign of the Chequers. Driven by a sudden impulse, he turned his horse's head, and rode towards the farm.

§3

That evening was the beginning of a change. He had found the Blaziers sitting in their kitchen, which he had never seen before, and which was a brighter, more comfortable kitchen than the kitchen of Churchsettle, or Platnix, or Ellenwhorne or any farm where women worked while men snored round the fire. The change of scene from the parlour to the kitchen made all the difference. The parlour had aimed at culture and had failed—the kitchen aimed at comfort and achieved it. In the parlour the girls had looked anxious and semi-genteel, in

the kitchen they showed up as decidedly superior in manners and education to the other young women of the district. If they had at first been ashamed of being caught in the kitchen, that awkwardness had almost immediately been driven away by delight at his visit. They had made him a good strong cup of tea, and they had all laughed together at the story of old Luck of Ellenwhorne, and in the end he had ridden home feeling cheered and restored.

After that he often called of an evening—either, on a slack day, riding down after surgery hours, or else dropping in at the end of the afternoon's round when it had brought him in that direction. He told himself that he had a right to take what company he could—that anything was better than the Chequers—that the neighbours would think he merely came to see Blazier—that he never saw Laura alone, and really wasn't sure if he preferred her to Clara—that she seemed perfectly satisfied with these family meetings and made no attempt whatever to recall the embarrassments of Gunpowder Night—that anyhow he couldn't go on any more after the manner of the Autumn and early Winter, that he must have some company, make some friends, if he were not to fail altogether in this work to which he was pledged.

At certain rare moments he would see his conduct as surrender—tell himself that what had been unwise in October was no wiser in February. But these reactions never lasted long—he almost felt as if his earlier course had been mistaken . . . after all, it had brought upon

him Laura's outburst of injured feeling. Now she was always perfectly simple and normal. She would sit sewing, with sleek bent head, while he talked to her father and mother. He was allowed to light his pipe. It was all homely and cheerful and restful—and perfectly safe.

So safe was it, that he occasionally allowed himself to dream—to see that sleek bent head beside the fire in his own house. After all, Laura would be an ornament in any man's home. Her strain at gentility now scarcely appeared—she generally seemed to him a natural and charming girl, whose manners were better than most. She certainly would acquire the perfect manners of a lady, once she was brought into the right surroundings. He could help her a lot poor little thing! How good and brave she was, after all! It must sometimes be hard to live as she did . . . she must long for a more congenial environment. Of course all this applied to Clara too. But it struck him that Clara was of coarser fibre than her sister He never pictured Clara sitting by his fireside.

Indeed, he did not often picture Laura sitting there. It would not really do. The neighbourhood would not approve—it would talk unpleasantly. And yet, why should it? After all, he would be paying it a compliment by choosing a wife out of its midst. . . . A wife—a wife—his thoughts were running on too far. He must not think of wives. And yet again, why not? Had he not prescribed for himself a wife?

A wife would fill those, empty, lonely evenings,

would speed him to his morning work . . . and it was important that he should choose a wife to whom Speldham would not mean weariness and exile—as it would most certainly have meant to any of those pretty, kind nurses at St Hugh's. And where should he get a wife if he did not get her in the neighbourhood of Speldham? He was not likely to find one elsewhere—even if he managed to snatch a holiday next year. He was pretty well tied to the district, which so far had produced nobody more suitable than Laura Blazier.

He thought suddenly of Susan Peascod. At first she had attracted him more than Laura, with her jolly smile and her friendly ways. But Susan was peasant unadorned—she had never been educated into a possible companionship. It was ridiculous to think of her. If Laura was unsuitable, Susan was ten times more so. He saw at once that if he wished to marry there was only Laura who would do. . . . But he did not wish to marry—it was only a dream. He would marry some day, but not just yet—he must wait patiently and hope for a future meeting with some perfect mate. And meanwhile he must stop dreaming and going so much to Coarsehorne.

CHAPTER VIII

§I

To Laura those drear months of winter were the gayest she had known. The short February twilights, with the green rift on the horizon that promises rain, were vernal with hope, as she watched the farm-drive from the kitchen window. On one night at least in the week she would see a horse's head between the hedges coming towards the farm. Then she would go back to her place by the fire, and take up her needlework, and sit over it with sleek, bent head . . . she had soon discovered that it was thus he liked to find her and to look at her.

She no longer regretted the parlour, for she too had discovered that he liked the kitchen best. She could not understand why, but she supposed that the kitchen was warmer and cheerier in winter time. She seldom spoke, but let him talk to her father. Something told her that he still liked to think he had come to see her father . . . and something would tell her when the time came that he no longer liked to think this, but would turn almost gladly to the thought that he came to see her and her alone.

She was content to wait. Under the thin skin of her

education she had a country heart, and her heart accepted the rule of a long courtship as a rule of love. Saul Peascod had been a lawlessly impetuous lover. . . . It was better to have a lover who kept the rules, who in his infinitely superior way was in line with the dozens of lads who hung over a gate for a year before they asked for a kiss. Saul had been a tormenting lover, mocking at the parlour and the kitchen together, setting their love in the lanes and in the fields and in the gloomy, moon-thridden corners of barns. She shut her mind on Saul's love as one shuts a door on the moon.

Her heart protected her in a happiness that, had she been the woman she aimed to be, she never could have known. A woman more sensitively bred would have felt the shame of such a change from passion to calculation—she would have seen her feelings as self-interested and mercenary. But Laura had had three years of genteel education and three hundred of yeoman inheritance. During the course of the three hundred years that her forefathers had owned Coarsehorne love must many times have been sold for money, or foresworn for a field, or sacrificed to a new barn. The concrete and the material had ruled that stock from which she sprang, and the love of money ran in its bloodstream, with distrust and fear of that which money cannot buy. Not only was she unashamed of her change from passion to calculation, but she saw it as praiseworthy and right—Saul Peascod did not represent the clamour of a nobler choice, but a

temptation she had renounced, a mistake she had almost made.

Further, a woman more sensitively bred would have had her moments of doubt and fear. She would have taken alarm at the weeks when the doctor did not come. For there were such weeks, and many a woman in the empty course of them would have feared if she had not guessed that he had taken fright, that he was ruling himself and keeping away. But Laura knew he could not keep away long, that he would come back, that she would look out one dusk and see his horse's head between the hedges of the drive. It was only a question of time—and she could wait.

She had been to a ladies' school—she had read the novels of Dickens and Miss Martineau and Miss Opie and Mrs Gaskell, and though she no longer read them, she still thought that she liked them. She had been taught deportment and elegant ways, and still practised them when she remembered. She had acquired soft tastes for pretty clothes and thin china and drawing-room carpets all over flowers and lozenges—she had learned to despise her father's farm, his yeoman pride, and to think her father commonplace. But dressed in all this, as in a useless gown, she walked in peasant ways—in a fundamental reverence for the practical and contempt for the romantic, in a blind intuition that showed her what her intellect denied, and in an awful patience and unrelenting purpose that were bound to give her what she wanted in the end.

§2

In spite of the break between Saul and Laura, there was no break between Churchsettle and Coarsehorne. After all, the courtship had never been official; it had become known only through Saul's brazening and shouting—Laura had always tried to keep it hidden. She still occasionally went over to Churchsettle to see Susan, though she chose moments when she guessed Saul would not be about. Towards Susan Peascod she felt drawn by a friendship she could neither approve nor deny. She often told herself that Susan was a rough, noisy country girl who had nothing in common with the genteel Miss Blazier, but she could not resist the attraction of her strength and kindness, of her cheery good-temper, of her over-flowing health.

Of late, however, she had noticed a kind of withdrawal on Susan's part. She now never came to Coarsehorne, and when Laura went over to Churchsettle, she found her friend unwelcoming. This made her angry, for she guessed what lay behind the change. Susan had shown no resentment at the ending of her love affair; it was only of later months that she had stiffened, since Dr Green had begun to call at Coarsehorne. Laura told herself indignantly that Susan was jealous—that everyone was jealous; and the only time that she came near to doubting her destiny was when, in one of the doctor's periods of aloofness, she was suddenly moved to wonder if tongues had been wagging against her, telling him

that Laura Blazier was no fit wife for a man in his position. She suddenly pictured herself as the victim of all the tongues in Speldham, led by Susan Peascod's. It was now three weeks since the doctor had called, and for a moment she lost her dogged belief in his return.

"They're jealous—they're all against me. That Susan's against me—she doesn't like me marrying better than she's ever likely to marry. She's been looking queer at me ever since he took to coming. They'd all like to stop it if they could—and they'll tell him things—that I'm common and ordinary just like everybody else. If he doesn't come again it'll be their fault—her fault."

For the first time she was driven to speak to Susan of the rift between them.

"You don't seem to like me as you used—nor to speak as you used. I somehow don't feel you're my friend. What's made you angry?"

"I'm not angry."

"Then why wouldn't you come to see us on Sunday? Father says he asked you to step in after church."

"There's no good my coming to see you, Laura. I'm not fine enough for you—we're none of us fine enough."

"So that's it, is it? And since when, may I ask, have I got so fine?"

"Since Dr Green started courting you."

"He ain't courting me."

"Calling, then. He's for ever calling at your place, and it's turned your head. You always gave yourself airs, you and Clara, but I didn't mind it, for I knew you'd

been better raised than any of us. Besides, I thought you'd grow out of it, and marry Saul—"

"It's half a year now since you knew I wasn't going to marry Saul."

"I didn't know it. I thought you were shut of him for the time being, and I thought he'd plagued and scared you too much, and I said to him 'You listen to me. She'll come back to you if you've patience and know how to treat her. Be gentler in your ways and wait a month or two—don't scare her and don't drive her, for she ain't cattle.' I said that, and he hearkened, and reckon he's been a pattern for the last four months—and then you go and spoil it all by letting another man court you. It ain't natural that he should stand that."

"Why shouldn't he? We're nothing to each other now."

"That ain't true, Laura Blazier, and you know it. Saul loves you as much as he ever did, and you—"

"I don't!"

"I never said it, but that's what it is. You do love him still."

"I don't. And I never did. You've no right to speak to me that way."

"I'm only doing it as your friend. It makes my heart ache to see you spoiling Saul's life and spoiling your own, just out of silliness."

"Why is it silly to let Dr Green court me?—If he is courting me. Reckon, Susan, there's many a girl round here, who'd be glad of a chance to be half so silly."

"Reckon there is, for there's plenty of fools. Now, I'm speaking plain, because you've driven me, and what I say is this—you're a girl that's been bred above your station. I'm not saying aught against your mother, who was bred in a town and has different notions from us country folk, but when she sent you to school, I guess she didn't think of the life you'd have to lead when you came back nor of the sort of man you'd have to marry—"

"There's no 'have' in it."

"Oh, ain't there! Reckon you're human like the rest of us. Book-learning can't change your blood. All it can do is to teach you to look down on a chap who's as good as you are, though he don't give himself such airs. Then when a different sort of man comes along, you think he's the right sort for you and the only sort that can make you happy. But he can't make you happy, Laura Blazier, because down in your heart you're further from him than you are from Saul. Outside, maybe, you've some of the same ways, but in your heart you're different. You won't be happy, and I'm not your friend if I don't warn you."

Laura did not speak. She felt vaguely frightened at Susan's words. Seeing her distress, the other girl came close and put her arm about her.

"There now, my dear. You do what your heart tells you, and send him away and have back poor Saul."

"I don't want Saul."

"Why not? He loves you and you love him, for all you say. To my mind he's better worth having than Dr Green. I reckon that doctor ain't much to speak of—he's nothing

to look at, anyway. When you put him beside Saul . . . well, I can't understand you, Laura Blazier, that's all."

"I'd be a fool to marry a man for his looks."

"Reckon you would. But Saul Peascod's something better than his looks. You aren't being asked to marry a poor man. He'll have this house and farm when his father dies."

"I don't want to be a farmer's wife. I'm sick of farms—I'd sooner live in a street."

"Laura, you don't know what you're saying."

"I do, I do. And I won't listen to you any more. I'm old enough to know my own mind, and I tell you I'd never be happy if I married Saul, who'd use me as all the farmers round here use their wives—and maybe a bit worse when he was in drink—"

"He's never in drink."

"How can you say that! What was he on Gunpowder Night, and on Christmas Night, and every night when there's been drink about?"

"He was only high-spirited—he's full of fun and spirits, and I won't say he isn't a bit rough, and maybe a bit wild now and then. But he'll lose all that when he settles down; and as for your doctor—"

"Don't you miscall my doctor. I tell you he's a gentleman by nature as well as by birth. He's got uncommon kind ways—he'd make me happy."

"Don't you believe it."

Laura burst into tears.

"You're an unkind girl, Susan Peascod, and no friend

of mine. Reckon you're trying to stop my marriage—to spoil my marriage—”

Susan was filled with compassion and remorse.

“There now, Laura, don't take on so. I'm sorry I spoke so plain—maybe I shouldn't ought. But I wanted to show you your own heart. . . .”

“My heart. . . .”

She sobbed bitterly, as pushing Susan's friendly arm off her shoulders, she groped for the kitchen door. Her sobs drowned the scrape of a foot on the step outside, and she opened it straight on Saul Peascod.

The sight of her took him unawares, and startled him as much as he startled her. He saw the recoil of sheer fright and surprise that she gave, and in his angry jealousy read it as a start of repulsion. Over her shoulder Susan's hot, anxious face was telling him to take her in his arms and settle the matter then and there and once for all, as the chance had come to him. But he was too surprised and angry to read the message, and instead a devil entered into him. He jeered out—

“Ha! Ha! Poor Laura! She's crying for her doctor. She wants her doctor—her fine gentleman doctor.”

His laugh rang loud and vicious with utter misery.

Laura pushed past him, moaning, and sobbed hysterically as she ran over the fields towards Coarsehorne. Oh, when would he come back?—Oh, when should she see him again? She must see him again quickly—quickly—after this. But suppose he never came! What should she do?

CHAPTER IX

§ I

By the next morning she had lost her fears, by the next week he had come again, and by Whitsun their banns were up in Speldham church.

It had all happened as she had planned—as she had known it would. But she did not know how much she had hurried it at the end. After those high words with Susan, that glimpse of Saul, she had unconsciously speeded up the whole process of her courtship. Her eyes had called him from under the lamp, her lips had smiled him a tender reassurance, her feet had walked with him to the house door, and as the long evenings grew, they had gone beside him down the farm drive, he leading his horse as far as the gate, where their parting had lengthened with the days.

When he knew definitely that he was going to ask her to marry him, he was surprised. But the impulse seemed to come entirely from his own heart—the eyes, the lips, the feet had moved only in response to his invitation. He could not tell exactly when the change had come—when he had ceased to feel the threat of his loneliness. Possibly when he had ceased to feel that loneliness itself

—when his evenings and his heart had been filled together with the solace of Coarsehorne. All he knew was that the obstacles that once had seemed to stand between him and Laura Blazier had now all melted away—indeed, when he looked back on them they seemed unreal, mere fetiches of his uneasy mind.

It was insufferable snobbery to have thought that in marrying her he would marry beneath him. Such an idea showed only the fundamental perversion of a middle-class outlook. Damn it all! She was better born than he. Her people had farmed Coarsehorne for three hundred years. What had his people been doing three hundred years ago?

Bottom and the neighbours might jeer at Blazier when he called himself—or rather allowed his wife to call him—“gentleman farmer.” But that was only because the neighbourhood still thought according to the middle ages rather than according to the middle classes. Indeed in Speldham there were no middle classes. There was only the “quality”—the Squire who owed his gentility to a long lineage, broad acres and money in the funds—and the country folk, who might be either farmers or labourers, since both still ate together at the farmhouse table. The Parson and the Doctor occupied an indefinite place as honorary gentry—they had in earlier times belonged to the country group, but now were heralding the first advance of the middle classes into rural life.

If he thought at all honestly he must see that Laura Blazier had something better than his middle class pre-

tensions. No doubt her education had been warped by false standards and by its own incompleteness; but when he had brought her into different surroundings, and made normal what up till now had been conflict and strain. . . . He saw her in his house, the doctor's perfect wife—full of coaxing care for him, full of interest in his work, full of a sympathy for his patients which no wife who had not been brought up among them could have shown. He would care lovingly for the tender plant of her growing, struggling mind . . . and she would give him companionship and sympathy and tenderness, and even sweeter things than these.

So he proposed to her and was accepted—a little to his surprise, for at the last moment he had had doubts as to whether she really cared for him—and the neighbourhood did not make much fuss, for the doctor must marry somebody, surely, and Laura Blazier would do for him as well as most others. And as for her, maybe she would be pleased now that at last she'd got a man with a black coat.

§2

The wedding took place at the end of June. Unconsciously, Laura had hurried it as she had hurried the latter part of her courtship. She had hurried it past the neighbours' gossip, past Clara's ill-concealed envy, past Susan's grave looks, past Saul's mocking, threatening eyes. During the period of waiting she behaved very

carefully. She showed no outward glorying in her fortune. Apart from a visit that she and her mother paid to Brighton where they bought her wedding clothes, she made no celebration or display. Indeed she seemed to keep at home more than usual—she was seldom seen driving in her father's trap behind that translated poor-law boy called Dixter, and she was never seen walking over the hill that hides the windows of Churchsettle from the windows of Coarsehorne.

When the day came Susan and Clara were both her bridesmaids—she had coaxed gravity and propitiated envy. She did not want to quarrel with these two, her sister and her friend, and they for their part would not forsake her, knowing in their hearts how much, in spite of all, she still had need of them.

The church was crowded. The Blaziers had invited all their friends and neighbours, and many more had come out of curiosity. Laura's Brighton aunt was there in a hat, the cause of much staring and whispering among the Speldham ladies, all of whom still wore bonnets. There was also a bonneted aunt of the bridegroom's, and one or two of his doctor friends; but for the rest, the church was full of the bride's people. There had been some speculation as to whether Saul Peascod would come to the wedding. But he had come—with his father and his cousin and his four brothers—looking very big and handsome, and rather scornful, and talking a lot to everyone in a loud voice, so that better-behaved folk looked round on him disapprovingly.

Laura came up the aisle on her father's arm. She was dressed all in white, with a white veil falling like a snow-storm from the little cloud of net and roses that crowned her head. Her eyes were bent to the big posy that she carried; similar posies were carried behind her by Clara and by Susan, both dressed alike, but looking strangely different—Clara tripping and mincing, and panting under the whalebones of her bodice, Susan striding like a ploughboy, and swinging her arms, posy and all, and smiling round at her friends in the congregation.

The Parson was late—it was rumoured that his wife was ill, and he had been up all night nursing her—but just as Laura had begun to fear there wouldn't be time to finish the wedding by twelve, he suddenly appeared, the clerk handed him the book and the service began. She still kept her head down, and answered in a quiet voice. It should not be said that Laura Blazier flaunted her triumph vulgarly.

Then, during a pause in the service, she heard a girl whisper close by—

"I'd just as soon not wed a gingery liddle feller like that."

"Ah, but he's got a carriage"—and there was some stifled giggling.

She coloured under her veil, and her triumph seemed a little less as she looked at Philip standing beside her and thought of Saul standing behind her in his pew—Saul who was so big and dark, whose body no one could

despise however much they criticised his ways . . . “gingery liddle feller.” She bit her lip, and then said after Mr Roffey—“I Laura take thee Philip to my wedded husband. . . .”

Truth to tell, her triumph had never been quite so great as she had imagined. All Speldham knew that Dr Green was no better off in this world’s goods than young Saul Peascod, besides not cutting half such a fine figure as a man. That he had white hands and a black coat and would not make his wife work hard in his service meant far more to Laura than it meant to her neighbours; and as for his carriage—the fact that it had started its long life as a barouche was the mere ghost of an advantage over the Peascods’ gig, especially as Bottom had announced his resolution of never taking her out in it, no not if she asked him on her bended knees.

. . . The service was over, the book was signed, and Laura and her bridegroom were standing in the promise of the sun. Handfuls of rice brought her the neighbourhood’s good wishes for her fertility. She laughed, and shrank against the doctor’s arm. Her friends crowded round her, and Saul Peascod came pushing through them, to take her hand in his and squeeze it till she cried out in pain.

“God bless the bride!—God bless you my dear, and keep you!”

He swung off laughing, so that she did not know whether or not he meant his prayer.

§3

The wedding breakfast was to be at Coarsehorne, and afterwards the newly married couple would set off on their honeymoon. For Laura was going to have the new and wonderful experience of a trip to Bournemouth—right away beyond Sussex. They would sleep a night in London, and if she was not too tired they would go to a play. The next morning they would take the train for Bournemouth, where they would stay a fortnight, her husband having engaged a locum for his work at Speldham.

A stream of traps and gigs and one or two waggons brought the wedding guests to Coarsehorne. In spite of the aristocracy of two cabs at the head of the procession, carrying the bridal party and their kin, it was all more homely and traditional than the bridegroom had dared to hope. Even the wedding breakfast was laid in the kitchen, since the parlour was too small for so much company. But Laura had had her wedding presents set out in the parlour, for she had heard this was the custom in genteel circles, though it was difficult to make a really genteel display with bed linen, and pots and pans.

They sat down at once to the breakfast, for there was a train to be caught at four o'clock. The family spread this fact with a certain triumph, for it was an entirely new and original conclusion to a local wedding. As she sat beside her bridegroom, Laura could see people mouthing "London . . . theatre . . . Bournemouth . . .

honeymoon," and her chin lifted with pride. The doctor himself viewed his wedding trip with a certain anxiety, as the only locum he had been able to secure was rather a raw and hasty young man, whose effect he doubted. Still, there was not likely to be much illness about in summer time, and he was leaving no serious cases—also he felt that after fifteen months' unslackening work he really needed a holiday.

The bride's health was drunk, and the bridegroom rose to respond to it. His speech was an unexpected success. He was pleased with the homeliness and simplicity of his wedding, and during his sojourn amongst them he had come to know his people and what would delight and amuse them most. Moreover, he felt that his marriage had given him a certain kinship with them—he was no longer a stranger, a "furriner." He was one of themselves—Joe Blaizer's son-in-law, eventually no doubt with his wife to inherit Coarsehorne. The thought filled him with friendliness and pride. He spoke from his heart, with a tongue which happiness had made merry.

When he sat down there were clappings and stampings and roars of laughter. Laura was surprised—and then suddenly delighted. Those evil words in church seemed to be wiped out. All round the table they were calling her husband a fine feller, and she forgot that it was an order of praise that she used to think she despised. As she looked at him, flushed and pleased with his reception, she felt a lift of pride in the man himself. Hitherto she had never thought much about him as a man—

except for those few humiliating moments during the marriage service—but now she saw a certain grace and charm in his small, well-knit figure, she saw that his features were good, even if his face was pale, and as for his ginger hair—it was auburn, a colour that would be considered beautiful by people of elegant tastes. Her heart kindled with a glow that had not warmed it since that August night when they had danced the polka together in the barn. Then she looked across the table, and saw Saul sitting and staring at her, with his face cupped in his hands. In her new lightness of heart she smiled at him, and he smiled back slowly. . . .

She stood up, all her lightness suddenly gone.

“Mother, it’s time I went to change my dress.”

“Time, is it? Very well, dear.”

She went from the table, with her mother and Clara, and as she went the company broke up and spread itself about the room. Mr Raffey, the Rector, who had sat glaring and silent during the greater part of the meal, now rose and came over to the doctor, taking Laura’s empty chair beside him.

§4

Laura came downstairs again, wearing a figured muslin dress under a mauve pelisse, and with a queer bewitching little hat tilted over her eyes from the heights of her polished hair. There were giggles and nudgings

and squeakings among the bonneted girls, but Susan Peascod stood out squarely.

"She looks as sweet as pie, and reckon that little hat suits her unaccountable well."

She kissed Laura as she walked by, and for a moment Laura stopped and clung to her. Then she felt her bridegroom touch her arm.

"Can I speak to you a moment, dear?"

He led her into the parlour, which was empty, save for Mrs Marchant and Mrs Lardner, who were fingering censoriously the displayed house linen. Thinking the bride-pair had come for a final hug before the journey, they went out with many nods and smiles. Philip ventured to kiss the warm red mouth which was all he could see of his bride's face as he looked down on her tilted hat.

"It's only that I wanted to tell you, darling, that Mr Roffey has asked me to call at the Rectory on our way to the station. His wife is very bad—I've been anxious about her a long time, but he never would let me see her."

"Can't the locum go? We might miss our train."

He was surprised, for he had hitherto found her far from unfeeling.

"He would rather have me call. It's only natural . . . and we shan't miss our train. We're starting quite half an hour earlier than we'd meant to."

"Are we really?"

"Yes—you seemed in a hurry to break up the party."

He patted her cheek.

"It's because I want to go—I want to get away—with you. . . ."

He was surprised at her sudden ardour. She threw her arms about him and clung to him.

"Oh, let's get away—let's get off. Don't let anything keep us."

"Very well, very well." He smiled good-humouredly at her eagerness. "We'll start at once, and I'll leave you at the house while I'm at the Rectory."

"You won't be long?"

"No, I don't suppose I shall be long."

They drove off amidst sobs and cheers. The sobs were only Mrs Blazier's, but they dominated the cheers, being fired at closer range, in the midst of embraces. Laura was impatient at her clinging, though normally she would have welcomed such a display of genteel sensibility. Now she was in a hurry to be off, and fairly ran to where the cab was waiting, trampling the scattered rice, which lay on the ground like snow.

Nobody knew that they were going to break their journey. They drove first to the house in Speldham street, where Philip left his wife by the study fire, which had been lit to cheer the locum's lonely evening.

"I shan't be long, sweetheart," he promised—"not more than half an hour at the most. We've plenty of time."

He left her sitting in his old pipe-smelling armchair, her feet in their new shoes demurely on the fender, her

new skirt turned back over her new petticoat, so that the fire should not scorch it. She was resigned, but not reconciled; she disliked this unofficial entrance of her future home, partly in dust-covers, partly given over to another's use. Besides, all that was childish in her, feared missing the train and losing even an hour of that wonderful trip, while all that was older in her had older, more searching fears.

At last he came, in spite of her watching the clock. She jumped up gladly as he entered the room, then suddenly read disaster on his face.

"Philip, what is it?"

He put his arm round her.

"I'm afraid I've a disappointment for you, darling. We must postpone our wedding trip for a few days."

She nearly swooned.

"Why?—Oh, why?"

"Because Mrs Roffey is very ill—dying. I can't possibly leave her."

"Oh, but you must. We must go away. You can't put it off now. Besides, you've got Dr Pritchard—that's what he's here for."

"Darling, don't you understand? She'll be dead in a few days, and I really can't hand her over to a total stranger."

"She's never had you attend her before."

"I know, and now of course it's months too late—she's in a terrible way. All I can do is to make things easy for her, but I *can* do that."

"Can't Dr Pritchard?"

"Not in the same way—he's a younger man than myself, with less experience, and perhaps not so much patience with cantankerous old folk."

Laura burst into tears.

"Well, I call it a shame. It's a terrible shame—and a terrible way to treat me. Why should I be sacrificed for her? It's her own fault she's dying—she ought to have called you in long ago."

"Of course she ought, dear, though I don't suppose I could have done anything for her. It's cancer, you know . . . and her husband's a queer old fellow, very queer. Anyway, I simply can't leave her now, poor soul, and it won't be more than a day or two."

"How do you know? Are you sure? I've heard of old people lasting for weeks . . . months"—sobs choked her entirely.

"It won't be more than a day or two"—his voice was grim.

"But, Phil, you really can't do this to me. I can't stay on after I'm supposed to have gone away. . . . I shall be so—so humiliated . . . and I want to go, I must go—I must get away from here if it's only for a week. Oh, do think of me first, Phil. Surely I come before an old woman you hardly know."

Philip was infinitely distressed. He was bewildered by this strange attitude of Laura's—it seemed to have something almost of terror in it. Of course it was dreadful to have to put off their wedding trip, but after all

they would have each other just the same, and he had thought she was too tenderhearted not to share his feelings about handing over poor Mrs Roffey to a stranger in the hour of her death.

"It isn't as if she knew you well," she sobbed on, "and you'd attended her a lot. Why can't she have Dr Pritchard? And, oh Phil we really can't stay on here with him in the house. Think of him being with us in the evenings."

"He'll go to the Chequers. I promise you he shan't be in your way. After all, he'll have the practice on his hands. I'll let him see everyone but Mrs Roffey, so we can have our honeymoon just the same."

"We can't—oh, we can't! Why can't he attend Mrs Roffey?"

"I've told you—because he's a stranger, not very experienced and perhaps not over gentle."

"Then why did you get him? Why didn't you get somebody better?"

"Because I couldn't. He was all I could get at this time, and if things had been as I'd expected, he'd have done perfectly well. Oh, don't be so unreasonable, my dear. Do help me a little."

But she could not help him. Her heart was torn by an almost superstitious longing to escape from Speldham and break the chain that held her to her memories. She felt that if she was away only for a week this could be done—but she must go at once. She saw too in his obstinacy a fault in his love—if he had really loved her,

he would have done as she wanted, he would not have let any professional needs come first. . . . And there really was something of evil omen in this shadow that had fallen on their wedding day. Death . . . postponement . . . all that was primitive in her shuddered and sobbed in dread. It was not till nearly night-time that he succeeded in comforting her.

CHAPTER X

§1

Mrs Roffey died three days later, and the same evening Philip and Laura Green started on their honeymoon. It all took place according to schedule—the play in London and the trip to Bournemouth; though the latter was a trifle shortened, as Dr Pritchard was unable to stay beyond his appointed fortnight.

Laura enjoyed it, but not so much as she had hoped. Try as she would, she could not forget the humiliation of those three days when she had tarried in Speldham, and everybody had been so surprised to find she had not gone, and some had seemed to think that perhaps she might never go . . . and for certain Mark Peascod had made a rude joke about the doctor being off with Mrs Roffey, and what a queer chap he must be to prefer 'em so long past their prime. Secretly she said—"he can't really love me much, or he wouldn't have stayed."

There was also a further disappointment—if such a word were not too slight for the sickness in her heart when she realised that even as another man's wife she could not forget Saul Peascod. Indeed during those first days of her married life her memories of Saul were re-

vived and given a new strength by the contrast of her husband's love. His kisses, so light and boyish and tender, were a challenge flung down to the memory of those other crueller kisses that had once enslaved her lips. Philip's love-making—inexperienced and always diffident—was as the ghost of Saul's. Sometimes she felt like a woman married to a ghost, and in the darkness her tears would flow for a substance and a reality that she had lost, for a living body that she had killed.

She had learned love in a different school from that in which she was required to practice it, but it was not only outward things that had betrayed her. She was disturbed by a sense of inward frustration. The real kinship of her mind was difficult with Philip Green. It had to depend only certain tricks of manner, on his possession of habits she had always longed to acquire. In her mind as well as in her heart she followed other ways from his . . . She did not always feel this; generally she was proud and content, savouring the new experience of life in a fashionable hotel, writing home proudly to her mother, to Clara, to Susan Peascod. It was only at certain times that her heart seemed to sway back into memory, to make comparisons and reproaches, to nurse fears, to say "he doesn't really love me much or he wouldn't have stayed," or sometimes—"He doesn't really know what love it. He thinks more of his work. He's that sort of man."

He for his part, had detected a coldness in her—a blank in their love. It was like a house of which only

some of the rooms are lived in. During those first days of their married life, he was disturbed by vague self-accusations. He wondered if he had unduly rushed the later stages of his courtship—hurried his little bride into a life for which she was not yet quite ready. It is true that she had made the first advances, but hadn't he hurried things a bit at the end? After all, it was for her a big jump and a big change. Perhaps she was frightened and her aloofness was due to fear. He must use infinite patience, tact and forbearance. Since he had perhaps unduly urged her once, he must not urge her now. His diffidence and gentleness increased. He told himself that only by his atoning patience would she grow accustomed to him and her new life. Then all the fires would be lit in the house of marriage, and there would be no more empty rooms.

§2

It was July when they returned, and the hay was being cut in the meadows. The nights of Speldham were perfumed with the mown swathes. The scent crept up at twilight to the village, and all night it hung over the street, aching, unearthly, sweet. It came to Laura like a message from the fields she had left. She had not thought that she would feel the difference of sleeping in the village, but she did—even though her bedroom was at the back, looking out on the long narrow garden that ran out between other long, narrow gardens to the backs of other

houses standing blocked against the golden moonlight of the sky.

Her husband slept heavily after his day's work, and did not wake when she slipped out of bed, and crept on her bare feet to the window, leaning on the sill and looking out into the scented radiance of the night—the white lake of the moonlit lawn, and the rustling blackness of the trees beyond, from which sometimes the tarrying song of a nightingale would suddenly float up shrill and sorrowful and sweet. She did not remember ever having experienced like this the beauty of the night—certainly not the pain that beauty brought. But now sometimes tears would blind her eyes as she looked up at the moon—the small, bright, glassy moon of the haying. . . . She seemed to see that moon, enlarged and rusted, hanging a huge dim orb above the harvest fields between Coarsehorne and Churchsettle—that moon eternally fixed in harvest with the last of love.

The newly married couple was asked to the haying feast at more than one farm. The doctor was delighted—he had always wanted to be admitted to the social life of his patients, and it was pleasant to think that his marriage had brought him into closer kinship with them. But Laura was not pleased—in fact she would not go at all to the haying at Churchsettle, and at Platnix and Widow's and Ellenwhorne she seemed moped and unwilling, sitting alone in her pretty clothes and refusing to dance.

He felt almost annoyed with her. He hoped that her marriage had not turned her head, definitely set her in

those silly ways which he had trusted came only of ignorance and false ideas of gentility, and would disappear altogether with time. During their courtship they had scarcely obtruded, and now he was surprised and anxious to see them gathering force.

They had some curious manifestations. One day she startled him by objecting to the name of their retainer.

"Bottom—Bottom—it's a dreadful name. I hate having to go calling 'Bottom—Bottom' about the place. It sounds quite vulgar. Why do we keep a manservant with a name like that? Can't we call him something else?"

He was very much in love with her, so he undertook to enquire if old Bottom had never at one time been christened a more decorous James or John. He had hoped to do so without betraying causes but he failed, because the old man had for long suspected his lady's offence.

"Christening name! Surely, I was christened wunst lik any mortal child. But my christening name ain't for common use. There's only a few as knows I was christened Neptune."

"Surely nobody could be christened that?"

"And why not, Määster? I'm telling you I was christened Neptune—all seemly and präaper by the Old Un himself. This is the first time I've ever had words cast at my name."

"But it's a heathen name, and you once said bad luck came of heathen names."

"It äunt a heathen name. It's a king's name, and you'll see this day on a pub at Hastings, where my fäather used

to call when he was in the free trade. He said to me wunst 'I've had you christened after the old King Neptune, and I've written it in the Bible, so that's your name'. But I tell you it äunt for common, and I'm Bottom to all save my old fäather that's dead; and if anybody's so genteel they want to call me something different, then let them call me—" and he suggested some alternatives that were hardly genteel.

Philip felt rather ashamed of his wife, but was more often inclined to pity her. Some of her little efforts at gentility appeared to him infinitely pathetic. Soon after their return to Speldham, Mrs Taverner had called, and now every afternoon Laura sat in the drawing room beside her tea table, waiting for callers who did not come.

Evening after evening when he came in from his round, Philip would find her sitting there among the antimacassars, the empty cups and saucers at her side, the bread and butter and the hardening cake. Something of anxious disappointment in her eyes would make him take her little body in his arms and kiss and kiss her.

Once he said—

"Why do you sit at home, darling? It would be better for you to go out."

"Somebody might call on me."

"But there's no one to call."

"There must be. Folks always call on a bride."

"The country people don't pay calls, and there's no family at the Rectory. I expect one or two parsons' wives

from other villages would like to call, but it's really too far. . . ."

"What about Lady Rushfurlong?"

"My dear!"

He stared at her. He had never guessed that she expected anything from that quarter.

"Well, I'm your wife—your bride—She ought to call."

"My sweetheart, don't sit at home waiting for her. It's sheer waste of time, for she won't come."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know her ladyship—not to speak to, but by reputation. She doesn't visit at all in Speldham. She doesn't even have me to attend her professionally."

"She ought to."

"Why? She has her own doctor in Bulverhythe. I've been called in once or twice to the servants—"

"The servants! I never heard the like! She won't have you for herself, but she'll have you for her servants—because you're cheaper, I suppose?"

"Yes, I suppose so, and I've no wish whatever to attend her ladyship. I've more than enough to do with the villagers and country folk. They don't leave me any time for lords and ladies."

"Then I think you've got no ambition."

Her lip quivered, and he could not resist his own pity. He put his hand under her chin and kissed the trembling mouth.

"Sweetheart, don't fret over these things. They don't really matter."

"No," she cried suddenly, "I know they don't," and she burst into tears.

Again it was long before he could comfort her. It seemed to him as if the time between his comfort and her tears grew longer day by day.

CHAPTER XI

§I

Her marriage was some months old before Laura revisited Churchsettle. She refused to go to the haying or to the harvest, though she had been unable to prevent the Churchsettle folk coming to those feasts at Coarse-horne, where she had been obliged to attend. But now the year had settled down to its stagnation, to the long fast of Autumn and Winter, when the earth keeps no festival. The fields lay brown and watery green under hurrying or brooding skies. They were scarred with hope, but countrymen would not dare rejoice even when that hope was green. Not till the earth had fulfilled her promise would countrymen chance their luck and thank her for it.

Laura was glad. By the time the fields had waked, she would, she told herself, have waked out of her own dream. She would dream no longer that she was a bird in a cage, looking at love through bars. At the Coarse-horne harvest-home she had felt as if cage-bars divided her from Saul Peascod, drinking and singing and dancing with other girls. They had sat next each other in the parlour and never spoken, they had danced in a row together and never smiled, and then by a cruel accident

their hands had been joined when in the great barn masters and men stood round and linked hands for the Hollering Pot—

“We’ve ploughed, we’ve sowed, we’ve reaped, we’ve mowed,
We’ve carried the last load, and never overthrewed.
Hip, Hip, Hurrah! Hurrah!”

She had felt his great hand enfolding hers—all the warmth and strength that had been so dear—but without any tenderness, and sudden crushing of her fingers as there used to be. Then at the end he had dropped his hand quicker than anyone, and turned from her almost roughly to the ale that was being carried round.

Thank heaven there was a year before that could happen again; and during that year so much might change—so many new hopes be born. She had a hope that was half anxiety. She said in her heart that if only she had a little one of her own she could forget Saul. A baby would make her forget all that had disappointed her in her marriage. The peasant in her never doubted its arrival, and yet she felt a growing anxiety as the months went by without a promise. Most of the married girls she knew had had a baby within the first year. Was she to be different from the rest? Was it perhaps that genteel people did not have babies as rapidly and as frequently as the ungentleel? If so, then there was one aspect of gentility that did not appeal to her. She was too shy to speak to her husband about it, and indeed a double shyness held them apart; for he, on his side, was glad that

his little bride should not have the cares of motherhood thrust upon her too early. He wanted her to be mentally and physically at ease in her new life before that life put out its flower.

The fifth of November passed behind closed shutters. Clara came up to the village and watched the procession with her sister from the drawing-room window, while Susan Peascod danced about the street. Then Christmas came and once more there must be parties and meetings, though not so inevitable or so overwhelming as at the agricultural feasts. At Christmastide you invited only kin. Philip and Laura Green ate their Christmas dinner at Coarsehorne alone with the farm's company. The Blazier women had never succeeded in making Tom dine separately from his men, and though on ordinary working days his wife and daughters fed apart, on Christmas Day they must be all together in one big family, as custom and goodwill decreed. Two tables were set end to end in the kitchen under a clean white cloth, and round them, eager for the turkey and pudding and October beer, sat, in crude contrast to the drooping Blazier girls and their anxious mother, the stockman and ploughman and shepherd of Coarsehorne, with one or two field labourers, and the wives and children of all.

It was a pleasing, patriarchal sight to Dr Green. He rejoiced that Laura had not succeeded in abolishing it, and he hoped that in time she would come to see it with his eyes. It would be a queer and rather pleasant thing, he thought, if he could restore her lost delight in her

own country—if through his town-bred eyes she should learn to see that beauty of rural tradition and honest custom which her mis-education had obscured. He beamed on her as she sat there in her warm brown velvet dress, trimmed at the neck and wrists with fur. She certainly looked a lovely, delicate thing, worthy of her own desires. Clara was not half so pretty. Dared he think that Laura had blossomed since her marriage—that love and security had given a new brightness to her eye and a new rudiness to her cheek? He forgot his frequent qualms as he gazed at her across the table and drank her father's black October.

She looked more blooming than the labourer's wives—most of them women whom marriage had made old. Not far from her sat Mrs Ash, the stockman's wife, scarcely older than Laura, and yet with a worn, lined face, and a mouth that betrayed the loss of many teeth. Dr Green knew that flour dumpling was the staple diet of a labourer's household.

When the feast was over, he took his wife home. The good ale had had its effect on her too, and she felt that she had not enjoyed herself so badly. Her hand crept into his under the rug, and as Mus' Trimmer slackened for Hammerpots Hill, her head drooped against him. In front she could see old Bottom's shoulders towering against the stars, as he hunched over the reins, and encouraged Trimmer with queer, sucking sounds. She dozed with comfort and the ale, and dreamed that a little baby lay within her arm.

§2

A couple of days later, Philip met Sam Peascod riding through Rushy Green. Sam felt Christmas-like and expansive, and bawled an invitation to Churchsettle.

"You've scarcely crossed our door, you and your lady, and it's time we had a feast for you. Nothing fine or grand—just a little extra Christmas eating and drinking for the neighbours."

The doctor accepted willingly and a date was fixed early in the New Year. He rode home wondering whether Laura would be pleased. She was not.

"You know I don't like these parties. They're crowded and noisy, and there's always too much drinking."

"But I wish you liked them, dear. I do—everybody's so friendly. It's one of the good things our marriage has brought me—going among our neighbours. I wish you could understand how pleased I am not to be treated as a 'furriner' any more."

She bent her head, and said slowly—

"I don't think I ought to go to Churchsettle. You know Saul Peascod used to be in love with me."

"Yes, but that was a long time ago. He's got over it now."

She lifted her head.

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I can tell. We all can tell. He seems cheerful and hearty enough, and only the other day someone told

me he was making up to Emma Marchant. I forgot who it was—let me see . . .”

“I daresay it was Bottom. You get most of the local gossip from him.”

“It may have been Bottom; but never mind who it was—I know I heard it. Besides, you wouldn’t expect him to go on caring all these months and months after you’d sent him away? Poor chap! He deserves something better.”

“He deserves nothing. He’s a rough, drinking, lying, worthless fellow.”

Her voice shook with a sudden, dreadful anger. He saw nothing but a faint smoke of it, and laughed tenderly at his fierce little girl.

“You mustn’t be so hard on him. He’ll get better as he grows older. Meantime, you won’t let him keep you at home, will you, my dear?”

“Oh no, of course it doesn’t matter . . . now he doesn’t care. . . .”

Her laugh went up gaily and bitterly out of her anger; underneath it her heart still burned. She suddenly felt exhausted, and sitting down, she picked up a duster she was mending, and thought on.

He had forgotten her and all the sweetness he had given and taken. He was going to give it to another girl, and take what she could give—poor silly Emma Marchant, who was so stout and plain, and always smelled of milk. . . . Ho! He had sunk his pleasure if he could find any in her. Poor, low stuff that he was—that he

had always been, if her love had not blinded her. She was well shut of him—as of course she had known all along. She had known for months that he did not care for her any more; and it went without saying that he must be courting someone else. That kind is always after somebody.

But she did not like the way Phil had spoken. Phil thought Saul didn't matter. He thought that she had long forgotten Saul. He thought Saul had forgotten her. He thought she did not mind if Saul had forgotten her. He took these things for granted and approved of them. He was contented and well-pleased that love should die and truth should lie. . . . He did not know what love was—nor anger. . . . Biting off her thread, she suddenly sprang to her feet and began to move her duster over the surfaces of walnut and rosewood that gleamed in the drawing-room dusk. She could not sit still any longer, letting her thoughts fly about her—burning thoughts, flying like sparks.

§3

When the day came she dressed defiantly. She put on her wedding dress, which had been dyed blue for more useful wear, white silk stockings and black kid shoes. She carefully parted and brushed her hair, and arranged it in a fall of little curls from the crown of her head. Saul Peascod should see how fine a lady he had lost.

She was sitting dressed and ready some time before

her husband came in. He was late, but she was used to such emergencies, indeed when he came at last she was not unprepared for his announcement that she must start without him.

"There's a message waiting from Galleybird—it came quite early this afternoon. They want me there at once."

"What do they want you for?"

"One of the housemaids has been ill—I called there last week, but said I shouldn't come again unless they sent for me. I'm afraid she must be worse. You don't mind going without me, do you, my love?"

"Oh, no—" she spoke airily. "I suppose you'll call for me?"

"Of course I shall. I'll come in after Galleybird, and I expect there'll still be a lot of the evening left. How beautiful you're looking tonight, sweetheart."

"Am I?—Oh, am I really?"

"Of course you are. You're always lovely to me, but tonight you look a queen."

He put his arm round her and kissed her carefully, so as not to disarrange her loveliness. Her lips murmured under his—"A—queen. . . ."

He wrapped her up in her cloak, and put her into the trap with many rugs, and injunctions to Bottom to drive carefully, as the roads were bad after the rain. In consequence they went at such a pace that in spite of the delay in starting, Laura reached Churchsettle breathless and shaken, but scarcely ten minutes late.

The company was already assembled—the usual crowd

of Harmans, Lucks, Lardners, Penhursts, Ponts and Marchants, in their broadcloths and muslins, guffawing and giggling together. Susan Peascod came to meet her gaily.

"Here you are, Laura. We were afraid you was going to be late. Haven't you brought the doctor?"

"No—he was sent for just as we were starting."

"I'm sorry for that, but maybe he'll join us later on."

"He promised he'd call in on his way back. He's gone to Galleybird."

"Galleybird!"

The company was impressed.

"Surelye," drawled Saul Peascod. "I'd heard as Rosie Piper was sick up at the Hall."

"It isn't Rosie," said Laura quickly—"it's Lady Rush-furlong."

She spoke in a sudden rush of anger, black and proud in her heart. Saul had spoken to mock her—to make it plain to all the folk that though her husband was a doctor, he was not grand enough to attend my Lord and my Lady, but was sent for only when the servants were ill. The next minute she wished her words unsaid—they would soon be exposed as an invention—but it was too late. They were already buried deep in murmurs.

"My lady, is it? . . . "That's a new idea"—"Reckon she's a hard piece"—"Maybe she's ate something that's disagreed with her up in London."

Laura tried to change the subject, not wishing to be involved further. Treacherously she admired Susan's

dress, which was her familiar pink one artlessly adorned with some new lace. The next minute, Sam Peascod summoned them all to table.

“We’d better not wait for your good man, Laura. He won’t be here for a long while yet. If all you young folk don’t eat too hearty, maybe we’ll manage to keep him a few bits of pudden.”

The meal was a mixture of tea and supper—boiled fowls and a big meat pie, with fruit puddings and cakes and tarts. To drink there was both tea and beer. Laura sat between Mark and Susan Peascod, and Saul sat opposite her a little further down the table between young Mrs Luck and Clara. Emma Marchant was quite three places away. Laura knew that though he would not watch her he could not help seeing her, and she held her head very high, and talked a great deal to Susan of how happy she was, in case he could hear as well as see.

There was plenty of noise and laughter, and after a time the familiar friendliness of it all melted some of her state. She could not quite deny that the life of genteel isolation she led up at the village was infinitely less amusing than the life of the farms. She missed the cheerful coming and going, the constant busyness of Coarse-horne. She had erected barriers between herself and these people who used to be her friends. Now she wished these barriers down—she saw them falling. She could have been happy but for two things—Saul Peascod and the lie she had told to flout him.

The latter she knew must soon be unmasked, and then

her two humiliations would be fused in one. Already there had been a certain amount of talk about Lady Rushfurlong's summons.

"Reckon this is the first time they've had our doctor. It's always been Dr Pullant from Bulverhythe up at the Hall."

"Surely, but we've a valiant new doctor now," said Sam Peascod with a cheerful wink at Laura—"we don't want to go sending to Bulverhythe any more."

She did her best to turn the conversation. She caught Saul's black eyes looking at her, and she thought—"he knows, he knows."

She made up her mind that she would watch for her husband's arrival, and be the first to greet him. Then somehow she would manage to tell him what had happened and beg him not to betray her, so that at least this evening she would not be exposed; though she knew that sooner or later gossip must expose her.

After tea they all went into the outer kitchen, where the serious business of amusing themselves began. There was not room for such a company to dance, but card-tables were laid out, and cards were even more popular than dancing among the farms. Those also who could sing and play obliged with solos. There was no accompanist, but such a luxury was not even considered. Joe Penhurst had brought his flute, and Luke Harman his clarionet, and Susan Peascod was ready as usual with her homely, wide-mouthed songs, in the choruses of which they all joined, with shouts and stamping feet.

Laura sat with her eyes upon the door, fearful lest her husband should come in and betray the inferior causes of his absence. But as time went on, the evening perforce absorbed her. She found herself listening to Clara, talking to Naomi Penhurst, joining in the choruses of the songs:

“The old baby-farmer, the wretched Mrs Dyer,
At the Old Bailey her wages is paid.
In times long ago we’d have made a big fy-er
And roasted so nicely that wicked old jade.”

She saw Saul with his head close to Emma Marchant. They seemed to be whispering together, and for a while her eyes forgot their watch upon the door. Then suddenly she heard a slight commotion, and she knew that Philip had come, that Sam Peascod was greeting him, and she was lost.

“I’ll say it was only a mistake,” she thought bitterly to herself—“I’ll say I quite thought it was Lady Rushfurlong, but reckon I misunderstood. And I wouldn’t have said it at all if it hadn’t been for *him*”—she gazed in angry sorrow at the unseeing dark face, and her own eyes were suddenly blind as the tears filled them. What a fool she had been to let herself slip unguarded into the evening’s fun! “Reckon he’ll mock me. Reckon he’ll know.”

The doctor had come in just as Susan’s song ended, so there was no other sound in the room but a few voices

which had not yet got up their full roar after silence. Sam Peascod's rose above them.

"Welcome, doctor. We're unaccountable pleased to see you—and not so terrible late after all. Her ladyship didn't keep you long."

"Her ladyship!"

Laura felt sick.

"Surely! We've all heard that Lady Rushfurlong's sent for our doctor at last, and don't want Dr Pullant any more. Reckon she only had him because of the Old Un."

"Her ladyship certainly wished to see me; but I didn't think you would have heard. . . . After all, Bulverhythe's a long way to send. But I see that, as usual, I'm interrupting Miss Peascod's singing. Let me find a corner and sit down."

He smiled at Laura, who stared at him, white and unbelieving.

But her ladyship was not to be allowed so easily to die out of the conversation.

"I trust there's no great sickness up at the Hall."

"Oh, no, no—none at all. Lady Rushfurlong's just come back from town."

"And ate something up there that's disagreed with her, maybe?"

Philip only smiled, and Laura, suddenly inspired, whispered to Susan Peascod—

"Give us another song, Sue. Phil won't ever talk about his cases. It isn't ettiquite."

Susan was willing enough, and as she stood up again, Philip made his way through the company and found a seat beside his wife.

"Well, my darling, how have you got on?—enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, fine. Phill, tell me"—there was some hubbub in the room covering their voices. "Was it really Lady Rushfurlong who sent for you?"

"Yes—didn't you hear me say so?"

"Of course—but—"

"Well, I shouldn't have invented it. Apparently she'd heard something about me in town, from Sir Peter Meredith—he used to be at St Hugh's."

"And is she going to have you to attend her instead of Dr Pullant?"

"I gather that she is. She doesn't see any reason for sending ten miles and back to Bulverhythe, when there's a properly qualified man at Speldham. But she might have chosen a more convenient moment."

"Oh, Phil—"

Her voice trembled. She could scarcely believe her luck.

"This is a good thing for you, isn't it?" she whispered.

"Of course it is. But, darling, you mustn't let yourself—"

He was forced to silence, for the song had begun.

CHAPTER XII

§1

On the way home he was able to tell her what had happened at Galleybird. It appeared that Lady Rushfurlong was hoping that Summer to produce the heir. She had been married for five childless years, and now at last her hope was for July. While in London she had consulted an important physician, who had greatly surprised her by recommending her own village doctor's attendance. She had already heard Dr Green's fame as an accoucheur rumoured of among her tenants, but had no great respect for country standards in such matters. However, when Harley Street had endorsed the farms she changed her point of view.

Naturally she'd rather have a man on the spot than one she had to send ten miles for, and it appears that my qualifications for this kind of thing are actually better than Dr Pullant's. I gather she'd never heard of my position at St Hugh's till Sir Peter told her."

"And she's definitely engaged you for the confinement?"

"Yes, she's definitely engaged me."

"Oh, Phil, I'm so glad."

He could not resist asking "Why?"

"Because—why because I've always wanted you to attend proper gentlefolk. It seemed a real insult that you should never be sent for to Galleybird except when the servants were ill. I don't want you always to be tied down among the farms and cottages, and never get a real chance."

"Darling, the farms and cottages give me a much better 'chance' as you call it than the Hall is ever likely to do. I don't expect Lady Rushfurlong's confinement to be in the least interesting, and I do expect Lady Rushfurlong to be considerably more tiresome than any labourer's wife."

"Really, Phil, you do talk queerly. By interesting I suppose you mean dangerous. I think you're horrid. I didn't mean that sort of chance. I meant a chance of improving your position."

"Of course it will mean more money; I shall naturally charge them more than I charge poor folk. But, sweetheart, you mustn't imagine for one minute that this will lead to any social relations between ourselves and the Hall. There's no earthly reason why it should, and I'm quite sure it won't."

"I don't see why it shouldn't. It has in other places."

"It won't here."

He smiled grimly, remembering his interview with her ladyship.

"I'm just one of the tradesmen," he continued pleas-

antly—"and there's no more reason for her to know me socially than there is for her to know her plumber."

"Phil! How can you!"

"I'm only preparing you, my dear. I don't want to raise your expectations, for you'll only be disappointed. And remember, not a word of this to anyone. Lady Rushfurlong would hate her situation to become a matter of local gossip, as of course it will in time, but needn't be now. I can't think how the Peascods knew I had gone to see her."

"I—I told them you'd been sent for to Galleybird."

"And I suppose they took it for granted it was Lady Rushfurlong. Well, it doesn't really matter. They'd have been bound to hear sooner or later. But I don't want them to know what I was called in for. You won't tell anyone, will you, darling?"

"O, no. I promise."

She kept her promise, but that did not prevent every inhabitant of Speldham and its neighbourhood knowing all about Lady Rushfurlong's expectations by the end of the week. Her Victorian ladyship may have planned a sudden epiphany in July, the display of her firstborn to a neighbourhood both delighted and astonished. But she might just as well have planned the sudden appearance of the sun in the midday heavens or a full drink out of a sieve. Long before the sun was above the horizon the light was in every home, and from the sieve of Galleybird Hall ran streams of gossip and subterranean information.

The general impression was that their doctor had done well, that he had ousted the foreigner, and won for Speldham an intimate place in aristocratic affairs.

"Surely, it's as things used to be before the Old Un," said grandfather Luck of Ellenwhorne, who could remember a prehistoric past—"times when Mus' Fuller the pothecary went bleeding to the Hall regular once a quarter, and Bulverhythe wur just a heap of stinking fish."

"Reckon she's heard how valiant he did with Mrs Pont and her twins, wot Mrs Turner gave up for lost, and the doctor had 'em all three at church for the christening by the end of the month."

"I hope he'll do as well for poor Petronill Ash when her time comes. Reckon she looks in a poor heart, wore out already wud her fifth child. But maybe the doctor ull be so took up wud the gentry as he won't have any time for her."

"Surelye, it ain't to be expected."

"I don't care wot he does," contributed Bottom "all I say is that even for her Ladyship I don't drive him out at night. It wur an understood thing when he took me on as his totem. I ain't to be disturbed o' nights, and may the Old Un fly away wud me if ever I drive him over to Galleybird at night, wud his bag of tools and pincers wot he boils as if they wur parsnips—no not if he asks me on his bended knees."

§2

A week or two later Laura met Saul Peascod in the lonely lane that runs from Hammerpots to Rushy Green. It was a sudden meeting. She had been spending the afternoon at Coarsehorne, but was anxious to be home for tea, to which she had invited Mrs Taverner in much state. Phil was to have called for her on his way back from a visit to Ellenwhorne, but evidently something had detained him, and she could wait no longer. She was annoyed. She was annoyed, because the roads were muddy and her shoes were thin, and when she saw Saul coming behind her down the hill she was definitely angry.

He was on horseback, but as he drew abreast he swung down beside her.

"Hullo, Laura my dear, where are you going in such a hurry?"

She thought that he mocked her, and her anger grew.

"I'm going home. And since we're asking questions, may I ask where you've been?"

"You may, surely. I've been to Platnix Farm."

"To see Emma Marchant?" The words rushed past her.

He grinned—"To see a pig."

"Reckon you saw Emma too."

"Reckon I did, and Lucy and Tom and Fred and a few others besides. And where have you been, Laura?"

"At Coarsehorne."

"And who did you see there?"

"My mother and—adone do! You're mocking me, and I won't be mocked."

"I ain't mocking. I'm only being civil. Reckon you and I haven't had a civil word together since two falls ago. When I meet you, you look at me and talk to someone else. Now there's no one else for you to talk to, so you've got to talk to me."

"I haven't. I wish you'd get on your horse again. I'm keeping you."

"I'm in no hurry. And I want to talk to you, Laura. I don't see no sense in your always being so cold and short with me. What's over's finished—ain't that right? Come, let's be friends."

For some unknown reason the tears rushed into her eyes, and she turned away her head, ashamed.

"I can't see what you have against me," he continued—"you've got what you wanted——"

"And so have you."

"I don't know that I have."

"You've got Emma Marchant."

He looked surprised.

"I haven't got her, and I don't know as I want her. Anyway, what's that to do with it? I don't see why we shouldn't be friends and it's hem silly of us not to, seeing as you're still friends with Susan and my dad. But you come to the house and glare at me as if I was ghosts. And now that the doctor's been ordered for Lady Rushfurlong's lying-in, reckon we're all dirt in your eyes."

It'll be a proud night for you, lying alone in bed, knowing as your husband's up at the Hall delivering quality."

For a moment Laura's look had softened, when she heard him flick Emma Marchant so airily out of the conversation. But it was just like Saul, having soothed her, to ruffle her again with rude, scornful words. Her eyes hardened and blazed.

"Be careful how you speak."

"I'm sorry. I disremembered I was speaking to a lady."

She jerked her eyes away from him, staring into the hedgerow. Far off, it seemed, at the bottom of the hill rang the clink of the smithy. There their ways divided and they would part. But they had some way to go first—a dangerous way. Her foot slid in the mud, and she stumbled. He caught her.

"Surelye, you're too fine a lady to walk. Look at your liddle shoes! Why aren't you riding in your husband's carriage?"

"I hadn't time to wait for it."

"Well, no matter. Here's mine."

Suddenly, with two huge hands at her waist, he swung her up of the mud, and plumped her down on the saddle of his horse. She screamed——

"Let me get down! Let me get down!"

"Much better stay where you are. I'll take you home!"

"You shan't!"

She had an appalling vision of herself being led through

Speldham on Saul's horse. She could see everybody laughing at her just as Saul was laughing at her now.

"Help me down," she pleaded. Without him she was powerless, for she was a helpless thing, who had never learned to ride.

"No, no, my dear. You stay where you are and keep your liddle shoes out of the dirt. If your husband don't look after you, I'd better."

He took the bridle and began to lead his horse down the hill. But Laura was desperate. She slid suddenly from the saddle, and if he had not caught her, she would have fallen. As it was, he only just managed to snatch her as she fell against him, and his clasp was violent with anger and fear.

"You liddle fool!" he cried. "You liddle fool!" and struck her twice with his open hand.

For a moment they were both so surprised that they scarcely knew what to do. Saul's horse, a tranquil beast but also surprised, scuffled a little in the mud, then fell quiet again. Laura was trembling from head to foot, and suddenly she burst out crying.

"Don't cry—don't cry; forgive me, and don't cry"—he was still holding her with one hand, and as she wept and trembled the other came about her. Then before either of them quite knew what was happening, they were locked together again, not in anger but in love.

"Oh Saul, Saul. . . ."

Her voice died under his lips. Her trembling body strung to a rigor, then suddenly went limp, clinging to

his. Her bonnet had fallen on her neck, and he whispered tender, foolish words into her hair. "Laura. . . My darling liddle creature. . . . My lovely. . . . My own one . . . my own lovely." They clung with all the last months' agony in their clinging—the agony of Springs apart. Then their arms dropped as they had clasped, and they stood facing each other in the lane, in a silence which seemed part of the smithy's clink at the bottom of the hill.

"Oh misery!" cried Saul—"I thought I had forgotten you."

She could not speak. She stretched out her hand to him as if to beg for mercy, then suddenly feared that he would take it, so let it fall.

His mouth twisted into something he meant for a smile.

"I thought I'd forgotten you, but seemingly I haven't."

"I never thought I'd forgotten you."

"Then why did you marry that——"

"Don't speak of him. He's a good man to me."

"Reckon he is. Then why do you treat him so?"

She had a sudden vision of Phil, no doubt now anxiously seeking her at Coarsehorne. . . . She pulled on her bonnet and tried to smoothe her dress, which was splashed with mud.

"I must go home," she said wildly.

"Reckon you must. And I must forget you again. Maybe this time it'll be harder still."

"Oh, Saul, I'm sorry."

"‘Sorry,’ ‘sorry’—that’s a sad word, my dear, and maybe one I should use, seeing all that’s past. I shouldn’t ought to have let you go."

He took his horse’s bridle and silently they walked on down the hill towards the smithy. Laura thought: "Phil’s good to me—I’d be a fool to change him for a man who beats me. Phil’s good to me, and he trusts me, and I’ve been untrue to him. . . . Maybe if he had more sense he wouldn’t be so good."

Saul thought: "She’s only fooling, same as she always was. She wants two different things at once, I reckon. If I’ve got any sense I’ll keep shut of her. . . . I don’t think I could every truly love her again the way I used, for she’s trodden on my heart."

They came to the cross-roads where the forge stood, and the glow of it streamed out in a flush over the grey afternoon. There was no longer any fear in speech, for they were out of the solitary dangerous lane, standing together at the throws, where the smith could see them from his anvil.

"Well, I’m off," said Saul roughly—"reckon you ain’t afraid to go home alone."

"Reckon I’m not. It was what I set out to do."

"Good evening to you, then."

"Good evening to you."

For a moment they both hesitated, as if both had something more to say. But the words did not come. Saul's foot was in the stirrup, his leg swung over his horse's back, and the next minute he was off at a sharp trot up the lane to Churchsettle. Laura watched him go, his broad back bobbing up and down between the hedges, disappearing into the dusk of the short, bitter day.

CHAPTER XIII

§1

The next months were grey in Laura's heart. The year lifted towards the Spring, the skies swept back into blue, the ruts of the lanes lost their gleam of light in water, the hedges roughened into leaf and flower, and in the fields and folds and woods were sweet, fragile sounds of newborn life. But in Laura's heart Winter still lived, grey and cold and hard, and miserably barren.

Not long after her meeting with Saul in the lane above Hammerpots, she heard that he was going to visit a relation of his dead mother, who had a grass farm in the shires. It was not usual in Speldham to pay visits to the shires, and Laura guessed that Saul must be going on her account. She wondered if he would come to say goodbye—sometimes she hoped it, and sometimes she dreaded it. He did not come, and then she knew that of all things she had longed for it—just to see him, hear him, speak to him before he went.

When he was gone a kind of deadness settled upon her. The fields, the village, her home seemed empty. It did not matter that she had scarcely seen him during the past year, that save for one shattering time they had met only

in company. The mere fact that he had been there, away among that huddle of roofs which was Churchsettle, that she ran a chance of meeting him in any house or at any corner, had held a comfort which she had barely realised till now when it was lost. It was as if a lantern had hung in a corner of a dark house, and now had been taken away.

Sometimes she was angry with him for having gone, but most often she saw that he had done wisely—so wisely that she suspected Susan Peascod of having counselled him. It was just like Susan she thought bitterly, to pack off another girl's man—Susan who laughed and joked with so many men herself that none took her seriously. But in her heart she knew that he was best away—that he should stay away till he had forgotten all about her and found another girl . . . as he was sure to do, being himself . . . as she had expected him to do ever since she had turned him off, and he had not.

Sitting alone, she would sometimes wonder if many girls were in her plight—married to one man while with all their heart and soul they loved another. Was it dreadfully wicked? She could not help it if it was; she could do nothing. Sometimes she tried—fought with herself to forget Saul, to thrust him out of her memory. She tried to make her sedate and humble love for Philip flare into a consuming passion that should burn out her love for Saul. It was no use. Phil was thoughtful and he was kind—it was impossible to imagine him either mocking

her or striking her, and yet she could not love him as she loved the man who had done both these things. The most that she could do was to find an occasional comfort in his tenderness, in his protective care of her, a comfort that was mixed with self-reproach.

At other times she was stung to antagonism by his complacency. She told herself that he was a fool, or he would be more suspicious—that he did not really love her, or he would be more passionate. His absorption in his work repelled her, his interest in the lives and personalities of his patients wearied her. Sometimes she felt as if she had been tricked by her marriage. She had thought it would mean an emancipation from the life of the farm, a translation into a genteel existence like that which her imagination cherished in memories of her boarding-school. And she had to spend her meal-times and her evenings listening to all the country's gossip—the doings and sayings of Lucks and Harmans and Bourners and Marchants and Pipers and Botoms, who seemed to interest her husband far more than they interested their own neighbours.

As time passed her hopes became more and more centred in Galleybird. There lay her only claim to success. She had married the physician of Lord and Lady Rushfurlong—nothing could alter that. When the great time came in July her husband would be an important person at the Hall, and she could not believe that his attendance would lead to nothing more. Surely, in spite

of what he said, a doctor was different from a plumber, and required social as well as professional recognition. It was true that Lady Rushfurlong still refrained from calling. But that was probably due to her condition, for the quality were always refined on these occasions—unlike the farmers' wives, who had no shame. When Dr Green had triumphantly ushered the Rushfurlong heir into the world, then the just claims of his wife would appear at Galleybird. She would not believe anything else.

Meanwhile she did what she could to help this consummation. Once she even persuaded her husband to drive instead of ride to the Hall, and take her with him. Dressed in her best, she was driven by a resentful and contemptuous Bottom through the big gates with their ramping unicorns, up the long drive to the columned portico, and had the privilege of seeing an under-footman open the door for the doctor, and afterwards of waiting three quarters of an hour outside the house. She had a dream of the big doors opening, and the butler summoning her in, with apologies from her ladyship "who had no idea that Mrs Green was outside, and wouldn't she come in and taste some cake and wine." In an improved version of the dream, her ladyship herself came out with the invitation. But for three quarters of an hour the big doors frowned at her in silence, opening only at last to let out her husband, full of apologies for keeping her waiting, but explaining that he himself had been kept waiting, and had seen his patient for only ten minutes.

§2

Dr Green was slightly worried by his wife's obsession. For one thing, he felt convinced that it would lead to heavy disappointment later on. Lady Rushfurlong had not, he knew, the slightest intention of recognising Mrs Green. In his heart he put her down as a hard, proud woman, whose notice was a doubtful blessing. For himself, he had no special interest in her. He was glad of a patient to whom he might unhesitatingly charge full fee, and was not above making use of her to the extent of calling on her more frequently when times were slack than he would have called on anyone who was not paying half a guinea for a visit. But she was a healthy woman, almost abnormally incapable of the unexpected, and he could not find excuses for going to see her more than occasionally. As far as he was concerned, Dr Pullant might have had the case and welcome.

Laura's thrilled absorption sometimes nearly disgusted him. He had not thought her capable of such vulgarity. Besides, there was something almost unnatural about her strained eagerness. Sometimes it seemed as if she were forcing herself to care more than even by nature she was inclined, as if she were deliberately pouring all her life and hope into this unworthy conduit. Once he tried to scold her—"Really, darling, I don't like to hear you talking in this way about Lady Rushfurlong. One would think she was the only patient of mine that mattered at all."

"Well, from one point of view she is."

"It's a very low point of view."

She was hurt, and he was contrite. He could not scold her. He tried instead to interest her in other aspects of his work, in other cases.

"I've been to see Mrs Ash today."

"Oh."

"Your father's stockman's wife, you know. Poor woman, she's had a terribly hard life."

"I don't see why you think that. Father's always good to his people."

"I know; but she's had wretched health from girlhood. Most of the labourers' wives round here are strong, healthy women, and in consequence they manage very well, even if times are bad. But have you ever thought what it means to a woman who's always ailing to have to do the whole work of a cottage, cook and scrub and look after four small children."

Laura shook her head.

"And there's a fifth on the way, as I expect you've heard."

"Most of the women round here have large families."

"Most of the women round here are very different from Mrs Ash. By the way, she's got an extremely unusual Christian name—Petronill. I was surprised when she told me."

"It isn't so uncommon in these parts, especially among the old folk."

"She said she was named after her grandmother."

Laura was becoming bored with Mrs Ash, but Philip continued unaware——

"Her mother was a gipsy, she told me—not a regular gipsy, but one whose people had left the road and settled down. You can see it in her face, I think—she has that queer dark foreign look that gipsies have. But her father was a plain Sussex man, a Piper, and she says her brothers and sisters are quite fair."

"You seem interested in her."

"Of course I am; and a knowledge of heredity is always useful in a case like hers. She's of mixed race, which may partly account for her trouble. Anyhow it's interesting to conjecture. . . . Poor woman, I'm afraid she's going to have a bad time."

"How?"

"When the baby comes, I mean."

A sudden suspicion, a doubt, a question gave Laura a new and painful interest in Mrs Ash.

"When is the baby expected?"

"In July."

"At the same time as Lady Rushfurlong's?"

"Yes, about the same time, I'm afraid."

Something in his voice made Laura's heart flutter and sink.

"I—I suppose Mrs Turner will look after Mrs Ash."

"If Mrs Ash goes on as well as I hope she will between now and then."

"But if she doesn't—I mean what will you do if anything goes wrong?"

"I shall have to attend Mrs Ash and hand over Lady Rushfurlong to another physician."

"Phil! You can't do that."

"Why not? Lady Rushfurlong's case is perfectly simple. If she was in another walk of life she probably wouldn't think of calling in a doctor. And anyhow, she can have Dr Pullant from Bulverhythe. She'd have had him as a matter of course if she hadn't happened to hear of me."

"Can't he attend Mrs Ash and you attend Lady Rushfurlong?"

"Darling, you mustn't talk nonsense."

"But, Phil, you can't throw over Lady Rushfurlong."

"My dear, I've no intention of doing so. I merely said it might have to happen in certain circumstances."

"But you've been thinking of it——"

"I've had to prepare for those circumstances, certainly."

To his surprise and horror Laura burst into tears.

"Phil! Phil! I'll never forgive you if you throw over Lady Rushfurlong. I've been so thinking . . . so hoping . . . and now—now it's just like you to prefer a cottage woman to me—to her. . . . You'll ruin all your prospects if you treat her like this. If she goes back to Dr Pullant, she'll never call you in again. And just when it really seemed as if there was some chance—some hope. . . ."

He took her in his arms and comforted her. He assured her that he had only been discussing possibilities, that in all probability there would be no choosing between Lady Rushfurlong and Mrs Ash. He could not bear to see her grief, unworthly as he felt it to be.

CHAPTER XIV

§I

Early in May Saul Peascod came back to Churchsettle. Laura heard from Clara that he had come, and wondered for some days when she should see him and how she should find him. Then one morning she met Susan Peascod in Speldham street, and asked her about him as carelessly as she could.

"He's home only for a while," said Susan — "he promised his dad he'd stop till after the haying, and then he's off back to Whissendine."

Laura's carelessness broke in a sharp—"why?"

"Because he feels he's best away. Come, Laura, you should ought to know."

"I thought he was shut of all that. At least. . . . I never thought but that he'd come home cured. Is he going back to his cousin for long?"

"For good and all," said Susan.

Speldham street, common and golden in the May sunshine, seemed suddenly to crumple and turn black. She felt a hand holding hers in the darkness, and she heard a voice say——

"Now, my dear, keep a stout heart."

Susan's arm came round her waist, and she felt herself being guided through the cloud. . . . They were standing on the doctor's doorstep, they were going into the house—into his study, which was the nearest room. Laura fell into the easy chair, her hands over her face.

"I'll fetch Mrs Conney," said Susan Peascod.

They came with water and sal-volatile, and in a few minutes Laura was better, sitting up to face the sharpness which had been mercifully dulled for a while.

"There, there!" comforted Susan, when the house-keeper was gone—"you'll be valiant now, my dear."

"Oh, Sue . . . tell me more about him. Is it . . . oh, reckon it can't be true that he's going away forever."

"His cousin Medhurst has offered to take him into partnership on his farm. Seemingly they did well together while he was there, and now he's offered Saul a share of everything—a great fine farm in the shires, with three hundred head of cattle."

"But surely he'd never leave his home and his brothers and his father and all."

"He'll be doing better for himself than if he stayed. And you know he had to go, my dear, so what's the use of talking?"

"He mustn't go. I can't let him go. Oh, Susan, I can't live without him here."

"Laura, you mustn't speak so."

"I will, or reckon I'll go mad. I've been a fool. I've married a man who's no good to me, and all the while

my heart belongs to another. And now he's going away, and I can't live without him—I can't . . . I can't."

She hid her face in her arm. Susan stood looking down at her, her breast heaving.

"Laura . . . Laura . . . keep a stouter heart, my dear, for all our sakes. Poor Saul must learn to forget you. And there's your own man. . . . Oh, I don't say you haven't made a mistake, but it's too late to change things now, and you should ought to love and follow the man you've got—not the man you can't have, no, not if you was to see him every day."

"Maybe I can have him."

"Adone do with such talk. You know you can't."

"There's such a thing as divorce, ain't there?"

"Not for girls like you—decent girls that have been bred up to know their catechism, and their ten commandments. I never heard of such wicked town ways. No, Laura, you must make up your mind to forget Saul Peascod and to give him his chance of forgetting you. You must think of what a good sort of man you've married, and how you've promised to be his true and lawful wife till death do part you. And maybe there won't always be just your two selves."

Laura's sobbing broke out again.

"If I could think that. . . . But I've a feeling, Sue, as I'm going to be childless. Maybe it's a curse upon me for marrying against my heart."

"Nonsense, dear. 'Tis months and years too early to talk so. You haven't been wed a year."

"Oh, don't you try to comfort me. I tell you I'll be childless—and see my husband delivering half the neighbourhood, and my own arms empty. . . . Oh, Susan, Susan, why didn't I marry a man of our own kind?"

"My dear, I won't listen if you speak like this. You've no right to go telling yourself you'll be childless and your man ain't your own kind. For none of that's true—unless you make it. You keep a brave heart, and you'll find all this ull pass away. But you mustn't meddle with folks that are stronger than you are, and act for their own good and yours. Promise me you won't try to see Saul and stop him going back to the shires."

"I can't promise that."

"You justabout can. Come, Laura, be the brave girl you used to be."

"I never was brave."

"Oh yes you was. I often thought you brave for trying to be fine and genteel with everything against you. I didn't hold with your notions, but I thought you'd pluck in sticking to them—all your pretty clothes, and the parlour at Coarsehorne . . . and now nothing's against your being a lady, but you've something else to fight, and you've got the same brave heart in you. When Saul's been away a year, you'll find it'll all come easy. But you'll have to be brave till then. So promise you'll let him go."

"Reckon I can't stop him going."

"But promise you won't try."

Laura suddenly started to her feet.

"Very well, I promise, Susan Peascod. You can let me

alone and stop grumbling at me. Because I promise. But I tell you my heart's broken over this."

Susan tried to put her arms round her, but Laura pushed her away.

"No, don't come near me. Reckon I must keep away from you a bit as well as from him. I'll hate you for a while—maybe a long while——"

"But it's not my doing."

"Hold your tongue, and leave me, Sue, for pity's sake. I hear Philip's horse at the door. Don't let him come in and find us nagging each other. You've got what you wanted, so you can let me be."

§2

During the next few weeks Laura stayed at home and cleaned her house. With a new and surprising energy she threw herself into the business of sweeping, dusting and polishing. She washed the china and the pictures, she polished the fire-irons, she set Mrs Conney to scrub the floors, while she herself went round with a mop and her hair tied up in a duster.

"She's turned queer, our Missus," said Bottom one day to Mrs Conney, when he found the kitchen furniture piled upon the kitchen table and the floor awash with soapsuds. "Reckon she used to be almost too fine a lady to step on earth, but now here she is sweeping around like a wench, wud a clout on her head."

"She's as fine a lady as ever she was," said Mrs Conney warmly. She felt perplexed and no little harassed by Laura's ways, but she would always take her side against Bottom. Her slim, dark little mistress, who was so unlike the blowsy girls round Speldham, had touched her heart. She both liked and pitied her for her fragile airs, and she sympathised with those social ambitions which the neighbourhood derided.

"It's high time this house got a good scrub. In London all the toffs have their spring-cleaning once a year."

"Well, I know of a dunnamany things as is done in Spring; there's ploughing and sowing and planting and lambing and rutting and I dunno wot else besides. But I never heard of putting a house all in dishabille just because the oaks are out . . . in these parts house-cleaning is a thing we do all the year round."

"And so we do here. You'll never enter a cleaner house than this, though I'll own it ain't so clean when your boots have been in it awhile. You stand off my boards if you don't mind."

Bottom went off muttering about "town hearts." He was sorry for the doctor, who had been driven out of his study and out of his bedroom, and out of his parlour, to and fro, one after the other, like the poor man he was. But Dr Green accepted his wife's energies, even though they destroyed him. He was glad to find her so interested in her housekeeping, though here again he occasionally had a sense as of something abnormal, as of a whole life being poured into a channel too narrow to hold it.

Indeed there was a queer link in Laura's mind between her house-cleaning and Lady Rushfurlong. They were both obsessions, in which she tried to find comfort for something she had lost. She had concentrated all her hopes and wishes on Lady Rushfurlong, because she wanted to forget that she still loved Saul Peascod—and now she concentrated on her housekeeping because she wanted to forget the hopes she had fixed at Galleybird Hall. Galleybird had been a refuge for her beaten hopes, but that refuge had been denied her ever since she had known that it too might fail. So she fussed round with brooms and dust-sheets and pails of soap-suds, and wore herself out washing pictures and polishing furniture. She dared not let herself think of what Philip had said about Lady Rushfurlong, nor ask how Petronill Ash was doing, nor touch on anything connected with what had once been her comfort and pride.

As time went on she had grown almost fatalistically to believe that Philip would throw up the case. Nevertheless it was a shock when he told her that he had done so. He told her very gently, for he knew how she would feel, but at the same time he tried to make her see the matter as a kind-hearted and sensible woman should.

"I simply should never have respected myself again if I'd left poor Mrs Ash to the midwife. As a matter of fact, I couldn't have done it—she'd have been bound to call me in, and that would probably have got me into even greater trouble at the Hall."

Laura sat staring at the early twilight sky framed in the window. Her face was blanched with its reflections and her own despair. She suddenly said quite calmly——

“Why couldn’t you attend both?”

“It would be impossible—it would be highly unprofessional conduct.”

“But after all the babies may not arrive at the same time.”

“I can’t chance that. I couldn’t throw up Lady Rushfurlong’s case at the last moment—she would have just cause for anger if I did that.”

“Is she angry with you?”

“She is a little. But I think it’s chiefly her pride that’s hurt—she’s not used to being given second place to a labourer’s wife. But she has no real grounds for complaint. Dr Pullant will attend her, he’s a first rate man, and the man she’ always had up till now.”

“And the man she’ll always have after this.”

“That’s quite probable. But really, darling, it doesn’t matter very much.”

“Not to you, perhaps.”

“Nor to you, my sweet. I simply can’t repeat emphatically enough that she would never have acknowledged you socially. She’s a proud, overbearing woman—a terrible snob—disagreeable in her manner, and thinks the world was made for her convenience. As they say in these parts, I’m well shut of her.”

“You’ve no ambition.”

"How can you say that! It's just because I have ambition—a definite idea of myself professionally—that I throw up an ordinary case when it shows signs of interfering with one that's more complicated and unusual. But that's not the point. I'm here to look after the people of Speldham, whether they're interesting or not. Lady Rushfurlong never was my patient—she was definitely outside the practice when I took it over, and can afford to pay for any doctor she chooses, a specialist from London if she wants one. Mrs Ash can afford to pay exactly nothing, she depends absolutely on my care, and if I don't attend her she will probably die—she may die anyhow."

"What would she have done if you hadn't been here?"

"Even Dr Shenstone would have turned out for her. Laura, I don't like to hear you talking like this. I know you don't really feel so hardly as you speak, but you sound—heartless."

"I am heartless. Leastaway, my heart's broken, which comes to the same thing."

"Darling! Please don't exaggerate things so terribly. You've been disappointed, I know, but it's only in a small matter—you've no right to talk of your heart being 'broken.' Don't think I'm not sorry—dreadfully sorry—" he gazed at her anxiously. "I can't bear to see you suffer—My sweet, don't look at me like this."

He came over to her, suddenly stricken by her eyes, but when his arm would have slid around her, she pushed him off.

"I don't want you. Please don't touch me. Please go away."

"Won't you let me comfort you?"

"You can't comfort me—just yet" she added in self-defence—"if you'll go away just for a little bit I shall feel better."

He dropped his arm stretched out towards her, and at that moment the surgery bell rang mercifully. He went out, and suddenly her heart melted. She could feel again.

She felt a surge of profound, overwhelming relief. Now, she thought to herself, my promise to Susan Peas-cod doesn't hold me any more.

CHAPTER XV

§ I

She could not have told why, but somehow the final loss of her hopes seemed wonderfully to make things plain. She now felt free to act as she pleased. It was as if life had made her a promise and broken it, and that being so she was no longer held by her own promises—to life, to Susan Peascod, to anyone. She told herself that she could do just as she liked, that she was no longer under any obligation to keep away from Saul. Not that she would try to make him stay at home and give up his plan for the shires; with the new vision that had come to her, she saw that that would leave things just as they used to be, in the bad old way. But from henceforward she belonged to Saul, who had never broken troth—throughout all their quarrelling and separation his heart had been true. He had mocked her and flouted her but he could not stop loving her. His heart would be true to her till death.

“I must go to him,” she said over and over to herself through the long summer twilight. “I must go to him.” She hesitated as to when she should go. When ever she went, Susan Peascod was sure to be there. The cat!—

with her cat's cradle of promises. Susan seemed to her at that moment a more formidable barrier than Philip between herself and Saul. Then suddenly she remembered that tomorrow was market-day, and Susan would be sure to be up in the village, shopping and gossiping. Of course Saul might be at market too—but on the other hand he might quite as likely be at home minding things while the others were away. Anyhow, she would be able to go to Churchsettle without fear of Susan's big round eyes.

The next morning she told Philip she would spend the day at Coarsehorne. She was no longer at war with him—she could keep quite still while he stroked and kissed her, and listen while he tried to comfort her about Lady Rushfurlong, and say at last—"That's finished; don't let's talk about it any more."

At any other time he would have noticed her queer restraint, which was as abnormal in its way as her former obsession, but just now he was an over-worked and worried man. There was a case of typhoid down at Papping-hole—a group of cottages under the hill on which the village stood—and typhoid always made him fear. He knew how ill-equipped was Speldham to withstand an epidemic; its primitive sanitation and water-supply would make it a swift prey.

He was almost absent-minded when he bade her good-bye.

"Enjoy yourself, darling—don't be home too late."

"Where are you going today?"

"To Poppinghole — the Harmans — Mrs Pont—Doucegrove—Ringlets—and a few dozen other places."

He kissed her and rode off.

"Are you going to wash them drawing-room ornaments, Mum?" asked Mrs Conney—"the room's ready for them to go back."

"No, not today. I'm not going to bother with the house today"—nor ever again, she thought to herself. That craze was over.

She put on her old straw bonnet. She would not dress in her best for Saul—he would only think her fine. Oh pray heaven he was not at market! As she went by she glanced at all the broad backs, the crowd round the pens, searching for him; but, to her relief, she could not find him, though she recognised two of his brothers. She did not dare go up and ask them about Saul—her words and her manner might betray her. At Coarsehorne she would probably hear where he was without any risk or effort.

She was right. Her father's house was full of the little gossip of the farms. Sam Peascod was selling his tegs up at market—he had gone with them and taken Mark and Harry. Had Susan gone? Surely—Susan never missed a market, and today she was buying herself a new gown. Yes, actually the pink muslin was to go at last. She had worn it for five years, and was tired of mending it, besides she was bursting out of it—she'd put on flesh in five years. Her new gown was to be a yellow one. She had seen the stuff at the shop, and would bring it home this evening. Clara had promised to help her make it up.

Laura listened almost tranquilly. Saul was there at Churchsettle whenever she wanted him. They were bringing in the hay, and it would be an easy matter to find out which field he was working in. She would slip over after dinner and speak to him just for a moment. Then in the evening when his day's work was done, he would meet her as she walked home from Coarsehorne.

§2

When evening came she was first at the tryst. She waited in a corner of a little field that tilted down from the high field where the hay had been cut that day. Night had not yet fallen, and a dim light was over the countryside, coming half from the fading sunset and half from the kindling moon. The scent of hay lay heavy on the motionless air, drowning the other accustomed scents of a summer dusk—scents of meadowsweet beside the brook, of elder in the hedges and dust in the lanes. As she stood there with the long grass and fennel round her knees, Laura felt a sudden clutch of beauty at her heart. It was one of those moments that came to her so seldom, and only at night, in which the countryside that stood to her by day for mere background and livelihood, quickened into beauty and mystery, breathing round her in perfumed stillness, in dim lights and shapes and shadows, calling to something in her that was partly her love for Saul and partly a love unknown. . . . The tears blinded her eyes as she raised them suddenly to the waking moon.

Hung high above the dusk, its light kindled as the earth faded, until at last her shadow lay at her feet. She still looked up, and slowly the tears brimmed over, as once more she felt the stirrings of that question whose answer is hid in the moon.

The moment passed and was succeeded by one of anxiety. Why hadn't Saul come? It wasn't like him to be late—at their earlier trysts of long ago, she had always found him waiting for her. Perhaps he did not want to come at all—she remembered their few breathless words that afternoon—"I want to speak to you—I've something to tell you." . . . "Can't you let me alone even yet?" . . . "This is something new, something different. I must see you tonight." At last he had promised, but perhaps he had promised only because he wanted to get rid of her and was afraid of what his men would think if he stayed talking and arguing with her in the field-corner. Perhaps his promises were worth no more than hers to Susan Peascod. She could not go up to the house and look for him, for they would all be home now. Perhaps that was why he hadn't come . . . Susan might have guessed where he was off to, and kept him back like the cat she was. . . .

There was a sudden movement in the grasses, a foot-fall, and she turned round to find him there.

"Hullo!—You here! I thought you were never coming."

She laughed nervously, and held out her hands to him. But he did not take them. He said—

"I very nearly didn't come."

"Oh, why?"

"Because I said to myself 'either she's playing with me again, which is bad, or else she ain't, which is worse'."

"Oh, Saul, why should it be worse? Wouldn't you be pleased if I told you that after all I loved you and wanted you more than anything? Why won't you come near me?"

"Because I'm afraid of you, my girl. Don't you see you ain't to be trusted? All these months—and years as it is now—I've been trying to get away from you and forget you, and now at last I've part managed to do it. Then you try and get me back."

"How do you know I'm trying to get you back?"

"Well, ain't you?"

"Not in the old way."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not going to try and make you stop at home and not go back to your cousin's in the Shires. All I'm asking is for you to take me with you."

He whistled softly.

"Yes, Saul—that's what I want now. I can't stay here any longer—no, not even if you stayed."

"You're telling me that you're shut of your marriage—that you don't love your husband any more, and so you're ready to disgrace him and yourself and me too?"

"Oh, it wouldn't be that."

"Reckon it would be all that. Tell me, Laura, what's happened that you should turn round like this, and want

to undo all I've done to help us both? I was on a fair way to forgetting you and starting all over again in the Shires. I was leaving my home and my dad and my friends and everything for your sake——"

"How for my sake?"

"Well, I saw—that time I met you, months ago—that you'd got yourself unsettled, and I thought that if I went right away maybe you'd forget me and settle down again. I don't say I didn't hope the same for myself, but reckon if it had been me alone I could have managed without going all that way . . . and now seemingly I've got to leave the old place just the same, and yet not do you a farthing's good by it."

"Oh, Saul, we should be happy."

He looked at her as she stood there with the shadows rising up around her from the darkening field. The moon had sucked the colour out of her face, which shone white and spectral and remote like another moon. He suddenly felt afraid of her. He knew that she must do what she would with him, that neither he nor his good intentions could stand up before her.

"Oh, Saul, we should be happy," she repeated.

"Happy!"

"Don't you believe that?"

"Reckon I do. Reckon I could be happy with you even if I'd spoilt your name."

"It needn't come to that. Phil would divorce me—I know he would; and then we could be married."

"And wouldn't your name be spoilt then? Oh, my liddle dear, you're talking shameful, and it's shame on me to listen to you. Why didn't I take you two falls ago before you'd gone and put God's word between us? I was a great owl, and now seemingly I've got to be a great scoundrel before I undo the wrong that's done."

"You're talking like a school-book, Saul. You didn't trouble about God's word when you used to kiss the gipsy girls and get drunk at fairs."

"I still get drunk at fairs, my dear, and I won't say I never kiss a gipsy girl. But can't you see it all gets different when it comes to you? I love you, Laura, and I'd hate to do you a wrong. I told you once my love for you was a married love. I'd have been a good husband to you if I'd married you, but I don't know what I'd be to you if I took you away from the husband you've got and brought you without a name among strangers, and a feeling in my heart as I'd done you a wrong."

"I tell you it wouldn't be a wrong. You wrong me if you leave me where I am. I'm miserable, Saul. I'm lonely. I don't love my husband—I never loved him."

"You're sure of that?"

She nodded silently. Somehow she could not make her tongue say either 'yes' or 'no.'

"And you love me? You swear it on your heart?"

"I swear it—oh, my love, take me and see."

She swayed as she stood there among the fennel, and suddenly he could bear no longer to watch her as a

wraith. The grass rustled as he sprang towards her and clasped her warm, living body. This was no ghost, but the woman he had loved and desired for years, whom he still loved and desired, though some contempt had gnawed the quality of his love. As his starved lips met hers he felt tears fill his eyes and blind him. He pulled her down into the grass.

CHAPTER XVI

§ 1

The days that followed that night seemed strange and unnatural. Laura felt as if she were living two different lives together. There was her life as Mrs Green up at the village, and her life as Saul's Laura in the secret places of the fields. The secret life was only a matter of contrived occasional hours, the other dragged on through day and night, and yet sometimes hardly seemed life at all. Both lives hurt her, perhaps the secret life the most. She often came back from her meetings with Saul shuddering and sighing, her face swollen with tears.

If she had ever, on the few occasions when she had really pictured a future, hoped to find comfort and joy in his restored love, she was sadly disappointed. For one thing, she knew that it came to her shorn of much of its first sweetness. Try as he would, he could not forgive her for all she done to him. She had failed him two years ago, she had betrayed his love to her ambition, she had deliberately sacrificed it so that she could be a gentleman's wife and live in genteel idleness. Then when that genteel idleness had failed her, she had turned to Saul again, she had caught him just as he was about to escape out of her

net—had sacrificed him again, for she knew he did not want to come back, since he could no longer give her what he had given before.

His love-making had brought her this new sad clearness of vision, for it showed her how his love had changed. It was no longer “a love that asks to wed”—she had trampled on that, and now he loved her as he had loved the gipsy girls. He gave her a gipsy love, which sometimes had its own dark beauty, but which more often frightened her, making her despair when she thought of the years before them.

She could see that he tried not to show her, and sometimes tried himself not to see, how things had changed. But she felt in her heart that he did not want her to join him in his new life in the shires. Because he loved her as a gipsy, he delayed his going. He preferred those secret meetings in the fields to an open life together, so he lingered on past the haying till they talked at Churchsettle of his waiting till the oats were ripe.

Sometimes Laura would urge him to go, feeling that she could not endure any longer the torment of those weeks. Also, she felt that when they were away together, when in fact they were married, his old love would be restored and the gipsy depart.

“You’ve changed,” he said—“once you were making an endless terrification to keep me at home, and now you want me to go—there’s no pleasing you.”

“But don’t you see it’s all different. Now when you go I shall go with you.”

"I don't know about that. 'Twouldn't be a sensible plan. I've nowhere to put you, sweet creature. You must wait till I've got a liddle home."

"Oh, Saul, I can't wait."

"But what else are we to do. I can't bring you all of a sudden among Will Medhurst's folk—'Twould do you no service, and you'd be miserable . . . no, you must wait till I've got a liddle house to keep you in. Then you can come, and no gossip need come with you. They'll all think you're my wife."

"I shall be your wife."

"You can't be that, seeing as——"

"Don't say it. You're unaccountable stupid, Saul. Sometimes I think you pretend, just out of spite. You know that Philip will divorce me, and then I can marry you."

"I'm not so sure as you are that he'll divorce you. It isn't every man who'll tell a thief to keep what he's stole as a present. Besides, it would all be in the newspapers, and all Whissendine ud read it and look black at you."

"They don't put the doings of folk like you and me in the newspaper."

"They might—anyway, I'd be ashamed of the chance of it."

Her anger rose.

"There you are—talking again like a copy-book. One ud think you'd lived good and holy all your life, and never been spoke of all over the parish as a bad man no decent girl ud go with."

"You don't understand, my dear. I own I've been bad, and done things as I shouldn't ought. But I tell you I ain't before sinned out of my proper station. These are quality sins."

She knew that she was making him do what he thought was wickedness—that the conscience which had allowed him to get drunk at fairs and make love in Egypt, definitely shrank from this plan of hers to restore their love to honesty. He could not somehow be made to understand that after Philip had divorced her they would be as free to marry as if she were a widow. His mind clung obstinately to its conventions, to the countrified idea in which she herself had been brought up, that when once a man and wife were married nothing but death could part them.

But though he resisted her, she knew that she could force him in the end. He still loved her as much as ever—it was the quality rather than the quantity of his love that was changed—and she had only to show him that her mind was made up and that if he would not have her at Whissendine he should not have her at all, for him to give way. She herself now saw that it would be best if they did not leave Speldham together—she could not face her arrival with him to share his cousin's home. There must be a little house waiting to receive her—but that would not delay them long. She urged him not to wait for the ripening oats, but to go quickly, so that she could come to him.

§2

There was another reason for her anxiety to leave Speldham, besides her longing to restore their love's integrity. But she never spoke of it to Saul. She never told him how miserable she was in her husband's house—how her fears of discovery alternated with shame to find that deceiving him was so easy. During those weeks between the haying and Saul's departure, she lived with Philip as a traitor. Her meetings with young Peascod generally took place under cover of a visit to Coarsehorne, and Philip more than once had said how pleased he was that her home should be near by, so that his many absences did not leave her without a refuge.

He was very busy during those summer months—unduly busy for the time of year. Normally July and August were slack, as might be expected in a practice where most of the sickness came from the weather. But this Summer was crowded both with the foreseen and the unforeseen. Early in July there had been the struggle at the end of which he had somehow dragged from death Petronill Ash and her son. He had sat up with them two nights, trusting neither the husband's love nor the midwife's lore, and for a week he had thought the child must die. But it had lived—a wretched, frail uncertain thing, with no promise in the years to come, nevertheless embodying the victory of life over death, which is the physician's reward.

The neighbourhood was amazed, for it had promised

Petronill Ash to death, and indeed rumour had given her to it the night the child was born. Here was another instance of their doctor's skill. Indeed his reputation was enhanced past any point it could have gained by attendance at the Hall. Everyone knew that Lady Rushfur-long was as strong as a mare, and according to local judgment could do very well without a doctor; indeed the heir actually arrived when Dr Pullant's victoria was midway between Bulverhythe and Galleybird. But their doctor did heavy work for his pay—often as not you owed him your life and a sovereign together. He would never take even a sovereign from Mrs Ash, though for her sake he had foregone maybe twenty of them. Everybody knew how he had made the choice between the two mothers, and only his wife thought that he had chosen ill.

But all his battle did not end in victory. Even while he fought for Mrs Ash, another foe was stealing upon him—not unawares, for he knew only too well what was coming, but under the cover of darkness—the darkness of ignorance and stone-set custom. From the day of his arrival at Speldham Philip had known what it would mean if an epidemic got hold of the countryside. Ever since that day he had urged and striven for the improvement of water-supplies and sanitation. Speldham both drank and drained into the Speldham Brook. Innumerable generations had apparently survived this arrangement, but only because, so the parish records told him, a prolific race had managed always to keep the births

slightly ahead of the deaths. In vain he had confronted the Parish Council with his statistics, and even with plans for a new water supply to be obtained from the Rothar marshes. The Council bluntly informed him that the Parish had no money to waste on nonsensical and costly schemes. It wrangled continually over boundaries, poor-rates and unsatisfactory workhouse masters. It could not add the Speldham Brook to its quarrels. It declared that the doctor's business was to cure sick folk and not to plague Parish Councillors.

"Well, gentlemen, all I hope is that this Summer won't teach you a lesson."

He had said that at the last meeting, roused out of his usual mildness by a display of that bovine stupidity which is a community's price for being unspoilt by civilisation. Each of these farmers and tradesmen taken by himself was a good fellow, shrewd, friendly and honest, but taken in a group they represented the blind, senseless wall of the past set against the future, the corporate bigotry of a tradition that can neither be moved nor demolished.

That had been at Whitsun, and now, only a few Sundays into Trinitytide, there were nearly a dozen cases of typhoid in the Speldham district. One or two had cropped up sporadically during the Spring—indeed the parish was seldom quite free either of typhoid or diphtheria—but now the epidemic seemed fairly set on its way. It was not merely, as at first, a question of one or two falling victims to the same tainted well. His patients were in

High Street and in Cackle Street, down at Poppinghole, and out as far as Fount hill and Rushy Green. He suspected the Speldham Brook, and in every house he visited he urged the inhabitants to boil their drinking water. He knew that some would heed him, that others would despise such finicking counsel, that many more would follow it for a time and then forget. No precautions would protect the whole community, save those which the Parish Council refused to take. He could only hope that some unknown factor of sewage or climate would arise to stay the course of the outbreak before it became a plague.

§3

Owing to hard work and many cases he did not in those days see much of his wife. Lately he had been fetched out so much at night that he had moved out of her room to another at the front of the house. Here he could be more easily roused, and his going out would not disturb her. The change brought Laura an inexpressible relief—indeed she could scarcely otherwise have endured the reproach of living with him. But now their common life was reduced to a mere occasional hour—a hurried meal, a passing kiss, a brief interval when he could doze in his armchair while she sat at her needlework. Their marriage did not seem to be in these scattered contracts . . . and yet she could not forget it—quite.

It rose in sudden waves of shame, when she realised

how sorely he was tired and over-driven, and how she ought to be concerned about it and caring for him, and how instead she was relieved, because his work took him out of the house. Looking back, it almost seemed as if she loved him once, and as if that love reproached her. Sometimes, on the other hand, she was angry. She told herself he was stupid—he ought to see that something was wrong with her, wrong with his marriage; he had no business to be absorbed in his work so that he forgot everything else.

But that was how it had always been—from the very day of their wedding, when he had postponed their honeymoon in order to attend Mrs Roffey's deathbed . . . and then later when he had destroyed the whole justification of their marriage by throwing up Lady Rushfurlong's case to attend Petronill Ash. He had miserably disappointed her, and now he was being stupid about it, too blind to see the mess he had made of her life—of his, if only he'd the sense to look.

Yet at other times the sight of him—so tired, so busy, so harassed, so unwitting of the tragedy that was at his door—smote her with a choking sense of pathos, or even sometimes with a vague regret for something she had lost in him. There was one evening in particular when he was just about to set out on a round of late calls at farms where people were very ill. He was stooping over his writing-table, marking off the cases he had already attended that day. His face looked wan in the ashen light of the dusk, which streamed upon it, showing her unexpected lines and hollows. His hand shook as it moved,

with the tremors of utter weariness; yet he was humming to himself a little tune.

“See me dance the polka
See me waltz around,
See my coat-tails flying
As I dance my partner round.”

The exhausted little tune came to her faintly as she watched him, and suddenly she felt her throat tighten and her eyes fill. She could not bear to think of that night when they had danced together in the great barn at Coarsehorne. If she thought of it she would cry—she was crying now. For mercy’s sake . . . she must pull herself together, or she would ruin everything. With an effort she gulped back a sob. All he saw when at last he turned round was that she was holding his overcoat for him to put on, a thing he did not remember her ever having done before.

CHAPTER XVII

§1

Though she had urged and hastened his going, Laura wept broken-heartedly when Saul left for the Shires. He went early in August, not waiting for harvest. He told her that he thought his folk suspected something was wrong, and bade her be careful, "or our business ull get about." In that moment of supreme anguish she found herself wishing that their business would indeed "get about" and release her by the destruction of her world. She had a terrible feeling that Saul was not really meaning to make a home for her, to send for her. There seemed something odd in his manner, a curious apathy.

She broke down and clung to him—"I don't believe you love me any more." He protested, he was angry—She said "You're changed," and he said he had a headache. She did not believe him, and they parted miserably, he vexed by her reproaches and she full of unquieted doubts and forebodings.

After that she did not even try to hide her grief. Time after time in the course of the next few days, Philip found her crying or with smudges of tears on her face. He could no longer fail to see that something was wrong.

"Darling, what's the matter? Won't you tell me?"

But she hid her face, and would not answer. Then a new fear smote him.

"Are you ill? Sweetheart, tell me what you feel—is it . . ." and he mentioned symptoms that were obsessing him now.

But this characteristic reaction to her misery only made her furious. It was just like him to be able to think of nothing but illness . . . not to be able to imagine any but bodily pains and fears. How thick he was! For months he had known she was unhappy but he had never guessed why. He took for granted that she never thought about Saul Peascod. He did not know that ever since her marriage she had thought of no one but Saul, loved no one but Saul . . . her husband was a fool if he thought his love could make her forget a lover like Saul. And she was a fool to have thought it, as she had thought once.

She was no longer trying to hide her heart from Philip, and it could only be a question of days before he challenged her again. This time she would tell him all, for she wanted him to know all, and to make plans for ending their marriage. It would be dreadful, but she must do it; because she saw that it would strengthen her hold on Saul if she wrote to him and said: "Philip knows everything and he is going to divorce me." Saul had now been away nearly a fortnight and he had not written. She knew he was no penman, but day after day her heart sank lower as the post went by. She wanted to hear how he was, what he was doing, whether he had set eyes on a likely little house for them. Perhaps he was hoping to

get shut of her, and trying the way of silence . . . he did not want her to come and live with him in a little house. All that was over. She remembered how strange he had looked when he said goodbye.

Her wretchedness made her savage, and when the time came she did not spare her husband, who spoke to her with the utmost gentleness one evening when surprisingly he was at home for an hour before the surgery opened. He found her sitting alone in the drawing-room, pale and rigid, with the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Dear darling Laura, you make my heart ache. Why won't you tell me what's hurting you?"

"Because you just about ought to know."

Her sudden turn of fury surprised him. It was as if he had stroked a small frightened animal, and it had bitten him.

"How can I know? Is it because I'm out and about such a lot? I can't help it, sweetheart, I long to be at home with you, but things are terribly difficult just now."

"I know they are—for me as well as for you."

A question that for some days had been in his heart found words.

"I wish you would tell me. Is it because we've been married over a year and there's no little one coming? . . . Tell me, darling; don't be afraid."

Six months ago that question might have helped them. But now it was too late. She had ceased to care about a child just as she had ceased to care about Lady Rushfurlong. Her mind was yielded to its one torment.

"No, I'm glad I'm not going to have a child. I couldn't bear it now. Philip, I don't love you any more."

In her fear and misery she had stricken clumsily. She watched him turn pale—tremble—disbelieve her—disbelieve his own ears.

"Darling, you can't mean that."

"I do mean it. Philip, it's true. I ought never to have married you. I—I love Saul Peascod."

"Saul Peascod . . ." he repeated the name as if he heard it for the first time.

"Yes. You know that once he wanted to marry me."

"But I thought—I thought all that was finished."

"It wasn't finished. I thought it was—but it wasn't. After I married you I knew that I loved him as much as ever."

An ugly question woke him out of his bewilderment.

"And does he know—does Peascod know you love him?"

"Yes—he knows now. He's known ever since June. He's gone away now to—to make a home for me."

"My God!"—he was passing out of confusion into anger, though he still felt as if he was in a dream.

"You mean to say," he continued, "that you've already made up your mind—made your plans—to leave me. Laura!"—the anger collapsed suddenly, giving place to great fear—"Laura! You can't do it. You can't leave me. I love you, Laura—I can't—I won't let you go."

"I must go. Oh, Philip, don't try to stop me."

"But this is only madness. My dear, you loved me when you married me. You can't have been deceiving me then—oh, say that you loved me."

"I don't know—I don't know."

She hid her face.

"If—if you love him like this—loved him . . . why on earth did you. . . . You'd finished with him months before I began courting you."

She did not speak, and he came up to her, and tried to put his arm round her, but she pushed him away.

"Laura, you must be mad—you can't be yourself. . . . Oh, my dear, why didn't you tell me about this earlier? Why have you deceived me all these weeks . . . months . . . years? I can't believe it. I really can't believe it."

"It's because you've been so busy that you really haven't noticed what was happening. Any other man would have seen."

"But I trusted you. I never doubted for an instant. . . . Oh, my dear, even now I can scarcely believe what you're telling me."

"You must have seen I was miserable—reckon it was plain enough to others."

"Laura, do others know about this—your parents? Have you told them?"

"No, I haven't. It's scarce a month since Saul has known . . . leastways—" she broke off, remembering that meeting in the February lane. "He first knew about

it a month or two ago, and that's why he went away to the Shires."

"Why did he come back?"

"Only to settle things with his father, so as he could go away for good and all. He meant to play straight by you—and he would have if I'd let him. But I told him I must go away too—that I couldn't live without him."

He walked over to the window, and looked out. It was almost a surprise to see Speldham street lying there homely and quiet as ever in the evening light. A waggon and horses dozed outside the Chequers, and some children played in a cottage garden; it was the quiet hour before supper, when the housewives were busy with their pots, and the men with their gossip in the Chequers bar.

Behind him in the room he could hear Laura still speaking.

"Then he said he'd go back, and he'd prepare a little home for me, and I'd come to him when it was ready. Philip, you must let me go—you mustn't stand in our way. It's our only chance of happiness now."

He turned round suddenly.

"Why in God's name . . ." his voice broke, but he managed to finish—"What I can't understand is why you never married each other years ago. There was nothing to prevent you."

"I was a fool. It was my doing. But reckon I've been punished."

"Then have you—have you really been so unhappy with me?"

"You know I have."

"I don't. I didn't . . . how could I know. . . . I mean, I know there were things that you wanted . . . things you didn't like. . . . I know that in a way you were disappointed. I tried to comfort you. But I never imagined—I expect I was a fool. But I thought you were happier than you could ever have been if you hadn't married me and I thought that in time you'd get used to what you didn't like and that everything would be different. I expect I was a fool. Laura, why ever did you marry me?"

She did not answer.

"Are you sure this man loves you—as much as you love him?"

"Oh, yes," she cried—"of course he loves me. He's wanting to marry me, if you—you'll divorce me."

"You're asking me to divorce you?"

She nodded.

"Well, I'm damned if I will."

She sprang towards him, both her hands on his arm, her eyes looking agonisedly into his.

"Oh, Phil, Phil, you must divorce me, let me go to Saul."

"Why should I? I want to keep you for myself."

"But you don't really love me."

"I don't love you!"

"No, you don't, or you'd never have treated me the way you have. You wouldn't have neglected me for your work. Why, on our wedding day you put off our honeymoon because an old woman whom you scarcely knew, was dying. Then when I was counting so much on getting to know Lady Rushforlong you went and threw up her case and offended her . . . and you go mooning about thinking of nothing but your work and never think of my being lonely and unhappy and—and—"

She stopped, sobbing and breathless.

"Laura, Laura, don't make us both so miserable. I'm heartbroken at having let you think for a moment that I've neglected you. I'll take the blame for all that. Oh, my darling, you've married a very dull, ordinary sort of man, whom you'll have to teach to be what you want him. But he loves you and he's not going to let you go."

"Philip, you must. If you won't divorce me I'll go off and live with Saul all the same. So you won't keep me for yourself."

"If you're not married you may come back to me."

"I won't—I never will. I swear it."

"You don't know what divorce would mean. I'd rather die than see you brought into all that shame—and so would Peascod if he's got any decent feeling."

Laura sobbed painfully. She had somehow never expected that Philip would take this stand.

"If you had any pride," she moaned, "you'd do it. You wouldn't let folk think you were putting up with my ways."

"I don't care what folk think."

They faced each other in the darkening room, but before either could speak again, their conflict was broken into from outside. Under cover of it footsteps had come upstairs, and now suddenly the door opened.

"There's a man come from Doucegrove, sir. He says 'Could you go over at once, for the Master's worse, and the little girl's been took bad'."

For a moment Dr Green could not speak. Then he said:

"I'm coming, Mrs Conney. Is the messenger still there?"

"Yes, Sir. I told him to wait."

"I'll see him at once then. You might find Bottom and tell him to saddle Trimmer."

He walked out of the room, leaving Laura huddled over an album pretending to turn the leaves.

§2

When the doctor came home again from Doucegrove there were eight people waiting in the surgery, and when he had dealt with them ten o'clock was blowing down the west wind from Speldham church. The house was silent. Laura must have gone to bed. He went up to her room and listened. He turned the handle and found that the door was locked.

The last three hours had been something more than a welcome interruption of an intolerable state. They

had ever so slightly changed him. During those three hours his temper had cooled and he had not had time to think. Now when he could think again—must think probably all night—he found in his heart the new quality of a deep reproach. It seemed to him as if he was to blame for much if not all that had happened—for much, if he went back no further than the last few months—for all, if he went back beyond them to the rash days of his courtship and marriage.

That night nobody sent for him, but he did not sleep. He lay awake and tried to think calmly of himself, of Laura, of Saul Peascod even. He must think calmly if he was to act calmly—to save himself and Laura and their marriage, or if he could not do that at least to save Laura. He did not linger over certain thoughts that came—the thought that Laura had brought this on them both, that she deserved it all, that she had deceived him, that she had basely married for consequence, and now they were both suffering for it. He somehow could not quite believe that she had never loved him—there must have been a time when she had loved him . . . and then he had failed her, allowed himself to forget her in his work, so that her old love for Saul had revived.

It was nearly two years since she had broken with Saul . . . he really could not blame himself for that—he had done his best to keep out of her way so as to give her old love a chance. But she had come after him—she had worked upon his feelings, made him feel a

brute for having shunned her. Then the rest had followed, and perhaps at the end he had hurried her, driven her faster than she meant to go. Her attraction had begun on common lines—the enticement of a lonely, woman-starved man—but it had ended in the complete enslavement of his heart and soul. Oh how he loved her! And he could not believe that she had never loved him. When she had lain in his arms, when her little fingers had twisted and played in his, when he had comforted her in her troubles, she must surely have loved him. She would have lacked the mere skill to deceive him so . . . if she had loved him once, she might love him again. He would be a fool if he gave her up to another man.

She spoke of divorce. His heart sickened. But what did she know about it? She probably had no idea of the defilement it would mean. Divorce would definitely and completely separate them. He could not let that happen—he could not let her go so far that she would never come back. Let her go and live with Saul, call herself his wife—anything, anything as long as there was a chance of her coming back. . . . But why let her go? Why not keep her, coax her, force her to love him? She must love him again, because she had loved him once.

But perhaps she had not loved him even once. He could not quite stay the doubt, when he thought of the first weeks of their marriage, and remembered that she had had even then her moments of baffling sorrow. From the first he had had to comfort her. . . . What a fool

he had been! He ought never to have married her. The marriage had been as much his wrong-doing as hers. She had pursued him—but not for marriage. It was only because he had hurt her feelings by shunning her. He had blundered from the first—he had run both himself and her into this snare of trouble. And now the only decent thing to do was to let her escape, even though it meant his life-long misery . . . what nonsense—he would recover, he would forget her; after all, she was quite unsuited to him—“no use as a doctor’s wife.” He repeated the words aloud so that they might impress him more.

But they went no further than his ears. In his heart he knew that he did not care whether she was any use as a doctor’s wife or not. All the illusions with which he had married her were gone, but they had left her there behind them in his heart, loved for her very frailty and failure, with all the pity that makes love immortal.

That was all he knew when at last the daylight came—that he loved her irrevocably, and that he could not hurt her however much he hurt himself. But neither could he feel, in spite of all, that it was his duty to set her free, so that she might go to another man. What sort of a man was Saul Peascod? What sort of a husband would he make? Did he love Laura as much as she loved him? Would he be good to her if he married her? All he knew was that he had a local reputation as a wild and violent fellow, and that long ago, when speaking of his probable marriage with Laura Blazier old Bottom

had said he'd "rattle her up präaperly." It was not reassuring. He could not feel that Laura would be hurt less if she went to Peascod than if she stayed with her husband. But Laura loved Peascod and she did not love her husband. There lay the whole question. Would she be happier with the wild and violent fellow she loved or with the kind and tender husband whom she did not love?

But she had loved him once—and even if she had not, she could still be made to love him. There it was—love against love—his love against Saul Peascod's. Surely his love must win. Anyhow he must give it a chance—he could not tamely surrender her without having fought for her. Hitherto he had not fought—he had felt secure and taken his treasure for granted. But now the thief was upon him, and he would fight. If he did not win—did not make her love him more than she loved Peascod—then let the best man take her.

§3

Once again his work brought him relief from the pain of thought. The day before him was crowded, so he must begin it early. He had breakfast at half past seven, and then set out on his rounds before Laura was awake. He left her there behind her locked door, and he locked the door of his heart upon her too. She must not haunt him with her unhappy ghost, for in work he must find strength—not for himself only nor for his patients, but for her.

It was a fine hot day. There had been no rain now for nearly a fortnight, and he knew that water supplies would be getting low. Every drought brought trouble to the Speldham wells. When would he be able to convince these people that the medicine they needed was not doctor's stuff, coloured pink and "sarching properly" but clean sunshine, fresh air and pure water? . . . They deliberately shut the sun and air out of their houses, and drank contentedly from what was little better than a common sewer—and then came to him for pink medicine.

Moved by an indignant impulse he suddenly turned aside into the drive of Little Worge Farm. Nobody there was ill, but Lardner of Worge was powerful on the Parish Council—perhaps he could somehow be worked upon and a few minutes spent in his persuasion would not be lost. But the doctor came at a bad moment. There was no sickness among the people of the farm, but a valuable and treasured cow was ill—the master had been up with her all night, and now her calf was dead. . . . " 'Twould have been some use if you could have helped me over that, but reckon a cow ain't good enough for a human doctor. Blacksmith's been down to her, but he's no use if things ain't serene, and if they're serene I can manage myself, surelye."

"I came to speak to you about the Speldham brook. I'm getting really anxious, and I feel you might be able to persuade the Council to consider it at their next meeting."

"I don't see how it can, Master. Reckon the Council's

got more than it can manage with all that talk there is of moving the market-place. And we don't have another meeting till next quarter."

"Can't you call a special meeting?"

"No, Master, we can't do that, seeing as there's no need of it. Every man ull say that he and his father and his grandfather before him have drunk the Speldham Brook and come to no harm."

"I wouldn't be sure."

"Well, 'tis plain enough—here we are to prove it."

"But some of us aren't here. What about poor young Marsh and Mrs Copland who died last week?"

"They never died of the Brook."

"They certainly died of the Brook, Mr Lardner. They died of the local water-supply, which largely depends on the Brook. The whole thing wants altering, or you'll have a real epidemic in the place."

"If we wur to do anything that cost money we'd have the whole countryside in a terrification. There ain't a farmer between here and Brede who doesn't grumble at the rates."

Philip tried to continue the argument, but found Lardner impossible to move. In disgust, he was going to turn his horse's head and ride away, when the farmer surprisingly said—

"You might come and look at my poor cow."

The doctor's first impulse was to assert with some heat that he was not a vet. . . . Certainly he owed Lardner no favour . . . then suddenly he changed his

mind. After all, he might be able to do something for the poor animal, and whether he did or did not it was worth while trying to keep in the Parish Councillor's good graces. So he dismounted and went round to the cowshed, where a big red Sussex cow lay in the straw.

The poor creature seemed in a bad way. Her eyes were half open, and her red flanks heaving and sweating. Lardner's cowman, an old man with a tender, wrinkled face, sat by her, watching her anxiously. Philip questioned him and examined his patient as well as he could. He then made certain recommendations that he would have made in human practice. He could do no more. He had all the Londoner's unfamiliarity with animals. But he told himself that he had probably been as much use as the vet.

"Well, I'm unaccountable obliged to you," said Lardner as they left the cowshed.

Philip merely nodded. Now that he had done his best for the cow, he felt angry with this man who would not move to help suffering human beings and yet was all care and venture for the comfort of a beast.

He rode on to Doucegrove, where the fever had come. The master was very ill, and now the daughter had sickened. After Doucegrove came Rat Farm, Founthill, High Wigsell, Barline and Owls' Castle. They had not all got the fever, but there were two fresh cases, one at Founthill and one at Barline. The thing was getting ominous. If many more went down he might find his

work more than he could manage single-handed . . . and then there was his trouble at home. Back into his heart came the old sickness, as he set his horse's head up Speldham hill. For three hours he had taken temperatures, felt pulses, prescribed medicines, argued with reactionary nurses on the benefits of fresh air and cooling drinks. Between his cases, riding through the lanes, he had forced his thoughts upon his patients and the threat which hung over Speldam. But now, ten minutes from home, he could think only of himself and Laura.

What was he to do? Oh once again, Physician, heal thyself. He had comforted and advised others, and in doing so he had won the reward of a passing forgetfulness. But he seemed unable either to comfort or advise this poor little bird who was fluttering so wildly in his hand. Should he let her go—fly off to the freedom she prayed for, even if in the end she regretted her lost shelter, and the hawk swooped down? No, he had already decided that he would not do that until he at least had tried the power of his love to hold her. Hitherto he had not tried—he had been a fool and held her slackly, taking for granted that she did not want to fly. Now he would see if the love that held her was not at least as strong as the love that whistled her away.

At last he was back in the village, riding up the High Street, stopping at his door, throwing Trimmer's reins to Bottom, going into the house. . . . It was silent, and dark with its blinds drawn against the streaming noon. Mrs Conney came out of the kitchen.

"The mistress has gone down to Coarsehorne, Sir. She said, she wouldn't be back for dinner, and she asked me to give you this."

She put a note into his hand, and after some fumbling, he read:

I have gone back home, as after all this I cannot bear to stay here any longer. Dixter will call for my things if Mrs C. will have them ready. I am sorry if you mind me going, but I cannot stay here any longer.

LAURA.

CHAPTER XVIII

§I

His first act was to ride down to Coarsehorne and satisfy himself that Laura really was there. Until he had done that he had a horrible dread that the note might have been a false trail and that she had really gone to Saul. But Laura was at Coarsehorne, languid and sick with misery, but evidently planning as yet no further flight.

She had that morning heard from Saul, a brief laborious letter in which he told her that he could not offer her a home just yet.

There is nothing hear but the laboorers houses and they are all occupied and I would not give you such a bad house. I am with my cosins at the hall as they say around here. Do not do anything silly my dear about letting folks know as I am not able to have you yet. Do not go saying I do not love you becos I do but I would not bring you here to live with my cosins as they would not treat you proper. Next year there may be a house.

Next year! All the harvest and the autumn ploughings and the dreadful Christmas feastings to live through till next year; all the moons—the harvest moon and the

hunter's moon and the trapper's moon. . . . She could not endure it, especially as she knew that all through these months and moons would grow the knowledge that Saul's love for her was dying. She could see that he did not truly want her to come and join him—even next year. Oh, why had his love failed?—And the answer came: because she had failed his love. She had despised an honest love that asked to wed; and now he did not love her honestly any more. He still found her beautiful and desirable, but he did not want her for his wife. He could not forget how she had hurt him and humbled him—and then how she had tried to catch him again—refusing to let him escape. Maybe he was right, and she was to blame. But she could not help that now. She must do the best she could for herself, and be content with what he would give her.

Since Philip at present refused a divorce, she would write and tell Saul that she had left him and was living with her parents. That would compel him to take action, almost as surely as a divorce and when Philip saw that she really had done with him, that she was determined to leave him, then he might relent and give her her freedom. She was annoyed when he arrived at Coarse-horne only an hour after she did, but she held obstinately to her refusal to go home with him.

“Let me be—oh, can't you let me be,” she moaned at her husband and her father and mother, when they all begged her to listen to kindness and reason.

The parents were bewildered—they had been given

no hint of the tragedy. Laura had not seemed well for some weeks, and would talk very little about herself, but they had never suspected such a thing as a secret love affair with Saul Peascod. How far had it gone? They questioned her, but she would not answer. She only cried "Oh, Mother, let me stay here," and they had not the heart to refuse.

Philip went back to Speldham for his afternoon round—dinnerless save for a glass of ale that Blazier gave him as he was leaving.

"I don't understand women," said his father-in-law.

"Nor I, I'm afraid," said Philip—"that's why I blame myself for this. There are things I ought to have understood."

"Surelye, 'tis nobody's fault but hers, the ungrateful cat! You've been a good man to her, and she should ought to know it, and not go hankering after that Peascod, who's a sad rough chap if all the tales of him are true."

"Do you know much about him—how he'd be likely to treat her if they married?"

"He wouldn't treat her as you've treated her—least-ways not if she treated him as she's treated you. But she can't marry him, so there's no use talking."

"She asked me for a divorce."

"That's just like her and her heathen wickedness. Surelye, you won't do what she asks?"

"She doesn't know what a divorce would mean."

"Reckon she don't. It would mean that neither her

mother nor I nor any honest folk would speak to her again."

"Well, it's not going to happen—not yet, anyhow. I'm going to try and get her back . . . and if she stays with you there may not be any great gossip or scandal, so that later on perhaps . . ."

"You're a good man. I've said it, and now I'm saying it again. You're just about twice as good as she deserves, and if you mark my word you won't be too good. These women want keeping in their places. I see that, now it's too late and they've pushed me into a corner. If I'd taken a stick to my Mary same as many a man around here does now and again, I'd have been määster in my own house by now, and the father of an honest Bible Martha and Hannah. Reckon all this has come of my letting her call them heathen names. Heathen by name, heathen by nature, as I'm ashamed to say."

§2

So the doctor's marriage stayed as it were halted on its way to destruction. The neighbourhood was given to understand that Mrs Green was feeling the heat up at the village, and her husband feared the fever too on her account. She had gone to stay with her parents till the hot weather broke and the sickness abated.

It was quite a reasonable story, and on the whole the neighbourhood believed it. Those who doubted most, that is the family of Churchsettle, were the most likely

to keep their doubts to themselves. There were legends of Saul Peascod and Laura Green having been seen kissing by moonlight, but these legends only moved like shadows through local gossip—they could find no home in the mouth of witnesses, and even old Bottom was unable to give them much substance, though he worked with a will. For the rest, it certainly was very hot, and the fever certainly was spreading.

There would be about one new case every day, and a dim terror was beginning to enter minds that hitherto had accepted the facts of sickness and death with tranquil fatalism. Almost everybody boiled their drinking water now, except the gipsies down in the cottage by Widow's Farm, who perversely never had a single case among them.

"Reckon our doctor's worth listening to now and again," said Bottom, "and 'tis best to be on the safe side o' things, though Lard knows wot it's costing us in fuel and fire, to say nothing of our kettles boiling themselves into holes."

"But he's got some hem queer notions all the same," said Harman of Great Streale. "Did you ever hear the like of it, but he wanted Lucy Selhurst put into a bath of cold water the other day!"

"Cold water!"—"A bath fur a sick woman!" "Surelye, 'twould be hard to beat that, Mäaster!" The Chequer's bar was clamourously shocked.

"I'm telling you 'tis true. But her mother and sister, being natural women, swore as they'd have no hand in

such doings, and now reckon she's on the way to mend, though Selhurst wur telling me as she'd picked all the feathers out of her pillow, and ud have done the same fur their best goose-feather mattress if they hadn't took it away and laid her upon straw."

"Reckon she wur light-headed."

"Light-headed and rambling in her wits—all about things you'd never believe. They say that's the way it always takes them. And that reminds me as Ned Marchant the night before he died, poor chap, swore as he could see the Lord sitting upon a throne, and his poor wife not knowing which way to look, he said it was over by the copper, which was full of sheets a-boiling for his shroud. . . . I tell you the family was präaperly tired of themselves when he went to his rest."

More than one good yeoman went to his rest that Summer. In the midst of his busy day Dr Green had now and again to find time to attend a funeral in Speldham churchyard. As a rule there were few burials during the summer months, but now they averaged one a week—Platnix and Alehouse Farm both lost their masters, Pont of Redpale lost his wife, and there were also deaths at Glasseye Farm, Dinglesden, Founthill and Rushy Green.

To Philip there was something very piteous in these country funerals. They had about them an air of simplicity and resignation which was new to his London experience. In Mile End funerals were affairs of plumes and pageantry, one felt that the mourners were receiving

at least an hour's comfort from the display of their grief—insurance money was being spent, new black clothes were being worn, the neighbours were all on the kerbstone or hanging out of the windows, talking, commenting and admiring. Whereas here in the country there was no pomp, no public drama in the tears shed for a yeoman. As a rule a farm cart brought him to his resting place. Nobody came to talk or stare—that was done at weddings—only a little group gathered with Mr Raffey round the grave, while more distant acquaintance stood far off, staring into the crowns of their hats. "Dust to dust" said the parson, and that phrase so meaningless among streets, brought Philip his only comfort. It almost seemed a greeting—a cry of the earth welcoming her friends "You come to me." These country folk had lived close to her all their lives, and in their deaths they slept with a friend.

There was something else that the doctor found time for, besides funerals, and that was visiting Laura at Coarsehorne. He came to see her almost every day—partly to silence any gossip there might be, but mostly that he might show her that he still loved her and was waiting for her to come back. She did not give him much encouragement—sometimes she would refuse to speak, sitting sulky and silent for the few minutes he could spare her; sometimes she would argue and plead, asking for her freedom, threatening to go away without it, but never going, as if she did not quite trust her welcome.

During those days Laura would not visit among her neighbours. There were harvest feasts—for if the hot weather favoured the sickness it also favoured the crops—but she would not go to them, and she absolutely refused to see Susan Peascod. Susan called at Coarsehorne more than once—she wanted to see Laura. “Tell her, I promise not to talk about Saul,” she said to Mrs Blazier. But Laura would not be moved. She could not help feeling that Susan was responsible for at least some of her misery. She had most likely put Saul against her—told him he’d be a fool to marry her, encouraged him in his hatred of “quality sins,” led him to believe that if he stayed quiet and made no sign Laura would grow tired of waiting and go back to her husband. “Anyways, she’s glad it’s happened. She wants him to get shut of me; she’s glad he’s changed. Oh, and I believe it’s her that’s changed him. He loved me—he loved me when we used to meet in the Lower Field. He didn’t want to go away—he wanted to stay and love me. It was I who made him go. She must have changed him, the bad witch . . . or he’d never treat me like this.”

Saul had written in reply to her announcement that she had left Philip, and she could see that he was angry. He repeated that he had no home to offer her, and that he could not have her without a home. He still said that he loved her, but he would not let her spoil both their lives by acting silly. They must wait till things were better—maybe a long while. So it was unaccountable silly of her to have left home and told her husband

everything. She felt that in his heart he approved of Philip's refusal to divorce her, and that her arguments and entreaties had lowered her in his eyes.

Those were miserable times, those times of harvest, when a big yellow moon watched the fields by night and a big yellow sun burned them up by day. Laura's heart alternated between a sick longing for Saul and his love at any price, and a fear of that love's dying cruelty. Sometimes she had almost made up her mind to go to him, to face all troubles and risks, to throw herself upon him and force his hand; at others she was afraid, and knew that she would never go to Whissendine. venturing alone among strangers to find at her journey's end the fulfillment of all her fear. Oh, she knew that she suffered for her own fault (when she was not frantically accusing Susan Peascod), that she had treated him in a way no man could forgive, flouted him, cheated him, abused him, snared him . . . she deserved it all. But why could he not forgive her? He had promised and vowed so much—why couldn't he forgive?

Late in August Emma Marchant died at Platnix Farm, and was taken to her burial. As from her high window, Laura saw the funeral procession go by the end of Coarsehorne Lane, and thought of the girl who had laughed and danced and kissed Saul Peascod, lying there in her white shroud among the sun-scorched flowers of the drought, she wished that she too might get the fever and lie there young and dead. Perhaps she would be forgiven then.

CHAPTER XIX

§ I

A few days later she sat in the kitchen at Corsehorne, holding a languid hand up to her forehead. Her head ached and it was insufferably hot, but Philip would sit there and talk. Her mother and Clara were there too, for she had told them she would not see him alone. They all three sat round and talked—like hammers falling. The evening was so sultry that the fire had been lit in the outer kitchen. The big kitchen was cool enough, for the sun had left the windows, but Laura felt on fire with the heat—a pillar of fire—or rather a bunch of nettles, for the heat was not constant and consuming but prickling, poisonous and irritating. She wanted to cry.

“It’s over three weeks since we had rain,” said her mother—“we could do with a drop now the harvest’s in.”

“How are you off for water?” asked Philip.

“Not so badly. One of our wells is dry, but we’ve a spring that never fails us.”

“A good downpour of rain is what we all need. Typhoid thrives on empty wells, and some of the folk round here scarcely know where to turn for a drink.”

"We're careful to boil our drinking water, Philip, after what you said."

"That's right. Be sure to do it always."

"I'm glad they've started praying for rain up at the church—it's not any too soon, if you ask my mind. But we've heard tell, haven't we, girls, that Mr Roffey don't hold with prayers for rain?"

Laura burst into tears.

"My sakes! What's the matter?—What's upset you, dearie? Ain't you well?"

Her mother and Clara both ran towards her, but Philip was there first. He put his arms round her burning, shivering little body.

"My darling—don't be so unhappy."

She sobbed on, and as he held her his face changed. He moved his hand from her shoulder, down her arm, to her hot dry hand. Then he held her wrist. . . .

"Sweetheart, you're not well—you're feverish."

She murmured something incoherently.

"How do you feel?"

"My head aches."

He laid her back in her chair. Then with an utterly grave face he began to examine her, to ask her questions.

"Phil, you don't think she's really ill?" asked her mother.

Then suddenly Clara cried out—"I believe you've got the fever, you silly thing, I told you not to drink that water."

"What water?" asked Philip.

"Every drop in this house is boiled," protested Mrs Blazier.

"It wasn't in this house," said Clara—"it was when we were out together."

"Be quiet!"

Laura sat up in her chair. She was trembling, and when she tried to stand her legs failed her. Now she was frightened, though only a little while ago she had wished she was dead and buried like Emma Marchant . . . and it was only a few days since she had greedily drunk that water at the gipsies' house, knowing full well that it might mean her following Emma to the churchyard.

"My dear," said Philip gently, "you must tell me all about this."

But Laura only covered up her face.

"I'll tell you," said Clara, who resented the angry way her sister had spoken to her—"It was when we were coming back from Widow's Farm last week. We both got unaccountable thirsty with the heat, and Laura said she'd never get up the hill if she didn't have a drink. I said we'd ask at the Brook cottage—then I changed and said we'd better not, because it was the Riplays' cottage and they never boiled their water. But she said she didn't care, so we asked Aquilla Ripley for a drink."

"Did you drink too?"

"No. I was going to, but I got scared and thought it wasn't worth the risk."

"Then why in God's name didn't you stop your sister?"

Clara had never heard Philip speak in that voice before. She was frightened, and whimpered:

"I couldn't stop her."

"You could have stopped her—knocked the cup out of her hand . . . anything to stop her drinking from the Speldham Brook. Now she's almost certainly got enteric, and may d—— be very ill indeed."

"Perhaps it isn't the fever, after all," mumbled Clara defiantly, "the Ripleys have never had it."

"Because they're gipsies, and a gipsy could drink out of a drain and not be any the worse. . . . As for Laura not having typhoid, I'm better qualified to judge than you. But it's no use arguing," he added in a calmer voice—"she must be to bed at once, and I'll call round again the last thing at night and see how she is."

"Get up, Laura," said Mrs Blazier, "and don't sit there crying."

Laura did not move, and Philip passed his arms under her as she sat, lifting her up.

"There, there, my love," he murmured as he carried her, "don't be so miserable. Perhaps it isn't much, and if it is, we'll soon make you well again."

Something in the tender reassurance of his voice reached her in the dark place where her soul lay. There was a comforting, husbandly quality about it. She opened her eyes for a moment, saw his face, then turned her head to his shoulder.

§2

He came to see her late at night. She had a blurred vision of his shadow heeling over the rafters in the candle-light, and of his eyes very close to hers, searching hers. Her temperature had gone up—she heard him say that was to be expected. Then she heard her mother ask if she really had the fever, but she did not hear his reply. She was comfortable, lying there in bed, and she did not care very much now whether she had the fever or not.

But with the hours, her comfort passed. The night seemed to grow hot, and she saw that her mother had closed the window. The bed-clothes weighed on her, the sheets felt both clammy and rough . . . she laboured to and fro in the deep pit of the feather mattress, toiling up the sides to slopes of coolness that became hot as her body burned them. Her head ached, not on the mere surface of her brow but in the core of her brain. She seemed to feel a hammering there as in a smithy, and her ears were full of the roar of a furnace . . . she was down by the smithy at Hammerpots, saying goodbye to Saul, watching him ride away up the lane. The hammers beat in her head. She tried to make them go back into the smithy, but they would not go . . . there was an anvil in her brain. If she saw the smithy she would see Saul, see him mocking her, forsaking her. Better keep the anvil in her brain. . . . What nonsense she was thinking—dreaming, she supposed. Here was

the daylight on her pillow—white . . . now turning red. It would be hot again today. Oh, how thirsty she was! Her throat ached with heat. They ought to have put something by her bed for her to drink . . . she saw her washing jug and bowl upon the chest. If only she could drag herself across the room, there would be water to drink—not boiled, perhaps; but what did that matter now? With an effort, she struggled out of bed; her head swam and she nearly fell as she crossed the floor. But she managed to reach the jug. It was empty. When her mother called in to see her at seven o'clock, she begged for a drink. But Mrs Blazier stoutly refused water either boiled or unboiled. With some reluctance, she brought her daughter a cup of milk. It was a little solace, but not much. In five minutes Laura wanted more. Her mother and Clara scolded her. They told her to lie still, and then she would not be so hot. Oh, if only Philip would come.

He came earlier than any of the family had expected him—actually before his own breakfast. Her first words were to ask if she might have a drink of water, and he answered "as much as she liked." He himself opened her window, letting in what coolness there was in the young day. The Blaziers were surprised, but he did not find them as prejudiced as many of the nurses he had to deal with. He explained to them the value of fresh air and the harmlessness of cold water. Laura need not suffer more than her own body made her.

He was pretty sure now that she had enteric—head-

ache, rising temperature, intestinal disorder all pointed to it. There was no rash, but the time for its appearance had scarcely come. Apart from the fear of death, his heart sickened when he thought of what she would endure—all the long cycle of discomfort, pain, misery, restlessness and delirium with which he was familiar . . . he could not forget how some of his patients had looked in the third week. . . . Oh, why had she done it? He had a fear that she had done it out of sheer indifference—just because she didn't care, and would as soon die as live—because she valued her life at less than a drink of water. He wanted to know, but he would not question her now. He devoted himself instead to making her comfortable—an open window, a cool drink by her side, clean sheets and the best flock mattress off her parents' bed. Then he left her with the promise of his return.

She lay there alone for a little while after he had gone. Her mother and sister had gone with him to the house door, and at first she was glad of the quiet in her room. Then the tears began to roll down her cheeks—slow and hot from eyes that burned. She was frightened—she wanted him back. Oh, what a fool she had been! This dreadful illness lay before her because she hadn't had the courage to take a quicker way out of life. She could have drowned herself, taken poison . . . but drowning and poisoning are frightening and painful things, while there is nothing frightening or painful in drinking a cup of water on a hot day, and not knowing or caring whether one dies or not. . . . She saw herself standing outside the

cottage at Widow's under the baking blue sky, looking into the queer secret face of Aquilla Ripley. She saw all her thoughts now. She saw herself lying in her shroud, being carried in her father's cart to Speldham churchyard, like Emma Marchant, whom she used to kiss . . . he would kiss her too—her dead mouth; he would tear off the coffin lid . . . she had seen him do it as she drank the water. Or he would kiss her living mouth, as he knelt in horror and contrition by her bedside, begging her to forgive, promising to marry her when she was well. He was sure to come to her now she was ill—that was another thing she had seen him do as she drank the water. It would be a good thing if she caught the fever, she had thought, for, living or dead, she would bring him to her that way; and if she didn't catch the fever, then all was well and she'd had a drink of water . . . she was drinking it now—no, there was time to stop. She could save herself—the water had not touched her lips. But oh, she was so thirsty, and what did it matter if she died? She saw the gipsy's black eyes looking down into hers, and suddenly a dreadful fear possessed her. She must not drink. She would throw down the cup. . . . Ah, there it fell!—a tinkle of broken glass—Her mother's voice was saying—"Why won't you drink it, dearie? Philip says you may." She was no longer outside the gipsy's house, but lying in her bed at Coarsehorne. Her mother was bending over her, and Clara was sweeping up broken glass from the floor.

CHAPTER XX

§1

Dr Green was now working beyond his strength. He tried to obtain help, but there was none available. In those days the medical profession was always understaffed, and when he wrote up to his old hospital he was told that they could send no one for at least a fortnight. He tried other hospitals with no better result. He tried one or two doctors in Hastings and Bulverhythe, but either they were away or doing extra work for the doctors who were on holiday. All that he could arrange was that Dr Pullant and Dr Sidney of Bulverhythe should undertake certain outlying cases that came within a mile or two of their homes.

This relieved him slightly, but he was still overburdened—in these which should have been the slack months when he himself was thinking of a holiday. There was little sickness about besides enteric, and the monotony of the cases began to weigh upon him—always the same warning, the same sickening, the same delirium, the same prostration, the same effort to procure the same nursing. He began to long for his winter rheumatism and consumption cases; and why were no babies born? He almost

forgot that scarcely two months had gone by since the epidemic began. It seemed to have lasted for years.

The weather showed no signs of breaking. Early in September there had been a thunder-storm in which comparatively little rain had fallen, and after which the fine weather had come back. The shortening days slightly relieved the heat, but that was all. He knew that the coming of Autumn would not necessarily mean any slackening of the scourge. Sometimes he told himself fatalistically that it must go on till it had done its work and there were no fresh victims left. Then the survivors might possibly take steps to prevent its return.

It was everywhere now—up and down High Street and Cackle street, away in farms as far as Dinglesden in the parish of Brede. The station-master was down with it, and the Parish Clerk, whose place in church was astonishingly filled on Sundays by old Bottom. Even people who listened to the doctor's voice were sickening in spite of their precautions. He began to wonder about flies and dust . . . if so, he could do nothing. He could not fortify the parish against them. He could just deal with the Speldham Brook, but now it seemed as if the poison had passed beyond water into earth and air. Only fire was pure. . . . Sometimes he thought it would be a good thing if the whole place were burned down.

Twice a day, every morning and every evening, he called at Coarsehorne, where Laura lay now in the abyss of the second week. Sometimes she did not know him, but at other times it seemed to him as if his visits

brought her a certain comfort, which was not entirely physical.

"You haven't been here for a long time," she said once.

"Darling, I came this morning. You didn't know."

"Don't forget me," she whispered so forlornly, that he found it difficult to force back his tears when he told her that he never would or could.

She was holding her own—that was his great hope in a disease which wars by attrition—that, and the fact that her mother and sister were more ready than he could have hoped to carry out the treatment he prescribed. After all it counted for something that Mrs Blazier had been born and bred in a town, and therefore had not quite the same prejudice as the countryside. While Clara's education had made her to a certain extent receptive of new ideas—especially if they came from Paris, as Philip told her this cold-bath treatment came. The neighbourhood of course gave over Laura Green to death on account of it, and Blazier himself was unhappy. But luckily for Philip he had no more power over his household in this matter than in any other.

One evening in mid-September the doctor was riding home from Coarsehorne up Speldham hill, trying to tell himself that Laura was better . . . both her mother and Clara seemed to think she had slept a little, and though her speech wandered, he thought that there was recognition in her eyes. Next week would probably be the critical period—either her temperature would drop, and her

mind grow clearer, or both fever and delirium would increase, and the third week would be an exaggeration of the miseries of the second. He dared not hope, and yet he would not fear. He tried not to think.

Suddenly he heard himself hailed from behind.

"Hullo, doctor!"

It was Lardner of Little Worge, riding up on his black mare.

"Hullo, doctor! I've some news for you. She's valiant! She's doing fine!"

Philip quenched the nonsensical idea that he was speaking of Laura.

"Who's doing fine?"

"Why, Beechy, my red Sussex cow, whom you doctored that time you were around. Reckon she's in milk again. You never saw the like."

Philip felt inclined to say "Your cow be damned, when all these wretched human beings are sick and dying through your folly and indifference." Luckily he forbore, and managed to say—

"I'm very glad to hear it."

"Yes, she picked up almost as soon as you'd treated her. I won't say I wasn't surprised, for smith, he could do nothing."

"I merely advised what I should have advised in the case of a human being."

"Well, that sounds sensible enough, and I hear you've got a hem clever way with humans. How's everybody getting on just now?"

"About as badly as can be."

"Surelye! I'm tedious sorry to hear that. I hope Mrs Green ain't no worse."

"She's no worse, I hope—but no better, I fear. And I've seventeen other serious cases of typhoid beside—not counting the mild cases and convalescents."

"I'm larmentable sorry for that; and look ye here, Doctor—when I said we couldn't do aught about the Speldham Brook, reckon that was before you'd saved my poor cow. I've been talking to Mus' Bournier and one or two other chaps on the Council, and it seems to me we might bring up the matter at our next meeting, which is in a fortnight's time. Then if you've got any ideas, you could come around and tell us about 'em, surelye."

"It's rather like shutting the stable door after the horse is stolen, Mr Lardner."

"Maybe, but we keep the other horses that way; and I tell you we couldn't have done nothing this Summer, even if we'd wanted to. There wasn't time. But now we can work out a plan that'll keep us all in health, even if not in wealth, seeing what it's bound to cost. I'll stand by you, if the others git interfering. You've done me a good turn, Dr Green, and one good turn deserves another. When I saw my poor Beechy stand up on her legs scarce more'n an hour after you'd gone that day, I said to myself—'that's a man worth pleasing, and reckon I'll do what I can for him, seeing as what he's done for me.'"

The doctor forced himself to answer according to Lardner's expectations rather than his own impulses.

After all, he was being given what he had been asking for ever since he first came to Speldham. He must not imperil the gift by criticism. He must forget the fact that if he had been given it when he first asked for it none of this misery would have happened—that even now it would come too late for much of the present distress. He must also forget the undoubted fact that Speldham would owe its improved water-supply to Mr Lardner's cow.

§2

The days dragged on for Laura. She did not know if they were days or weeks or hours. Sometimes she was still standing outside the gipsy's house, asking herself whether a drink of water was worth so much misery. "Now I know what it's like," she said to herself, "I should ought to be wiser." Then the scene would move on to Hammerpots and the smithy, but the time would go backwards, and she could see Saul Peascod riding beside her in the lane. "Saul, I'm unaccountable ill and wretched. Won't you come to see me? I made sure you'd come, when you heard how bad I was." He answered "I'll come and see you when you're dead. You'll look beautiful then."

There was so much she wanted to say—to tell them at her bedside. She wanted to ask them to send for Saul, but she could not find the words. She could only find stupid words. "I want Dixter," she once said, and almost

laughed at herself for saying it. Then she was frightened because she could not tell them what she really wanted. Her mind must be wandering—they were talking soothingly to her, telling her to lie quiet and not to worry. They knew that she did not really want Dixter. She could see them all three—her father and mother and Philip. Was Philip really there? And Susan Peascod? Surely that was Susan's arm behind her now, lifting her for a drink of water. No, it was Aquilla Ripley's face looking down into hers—a brown face with a scar. . . . What shall we have for dinner today, Mrs Conney? I'm tired of rabbit. Do you think you could get a joint? But we ought to have fowls if Lady Rushfurlong's coming . . . do you take sugar in your tea, my lady? . . . Oh, Mother, we must get Father to go and call on Dr Green. I should like to know him. He looks so genteel. . . . Can you dance the polka? I'll ask Ash to give us another tune . . . if, if you give up Lady Rushfurlong for Petronill Ash, I'll never speak to you again. Emma, my husband was up all last night at Lady Rushfurlong's. The heir was born, you know, and my husband was attending her. As soon as she's well we're going there for afternoon tea. So I'm glad I never married Saul Peascod. . . . He's kissing Emma now she's dead. . . . Emma Marchant's dead, and I may as well die too. It's easy to catch the fever and die. . . . Oh, Saul, Saul, don't look at me so—I can't abear it. Let's ask Susan Peascod to sing. . . . 'The old baby farmer has been executed. It's quite time she was put of the way. She was a bad woman

it is not disputed.' . . . Oh, Phil, I've been bad, bad—a bad wife. . . . Take away that light . . . a bad, bad wife. Saul, Saul, why did you love me so and then leave me? I'm wicked without you . . . the moon shining very big and round . . . that's the Lower Field . . . oh, if Phil should know, he'd break his heart . . . take away that light—it's the moon. . . . Saul, you're swearing it to me on my lips. . . . Lord have mercy upon us and incline our hearts. . . . Sing, Susan, sing—it's a party. . . . Saul can't dance the polka. . . . 'To all these sad crimes there must be an ending, Secrets like these for ever can't last.' . . . Dying, dying. . . . Oh, kiss poor Emma now she's dead. . . . 'Poor girls who fall from the straight paths of virtue. . . . So the baby was sent to the cruel baby farms.' . . ."

Dreaming in a pool—delicious coolness. She was swimming in the sea at Bulverhythe . . . she was still at school. Oh, how lovely and how sweet. . . . Why, she too was awake and not in the sea at all. . . . A dream seemed to roll away, and she found herself sitting in a bath, supported by her mother and Susan Peascod. She had a feeling as if some wild animal had been shaking her, but now had let her go. Her brain was clearing. She asked—"What are you doing to me?"

"That's better," said Susan Peascod.

"We're putting you in a bath, dearie," said her mother, "same as Philip said we was to, to get your temperature down."

"Why's Susan here?"

"She came to help me with the nursing. And you've been asking for her all along."

"Me! I didn't know it."

"Well, I'm glad to be here with you, so I hope you don't mind," said Susan, "and I reckon my arms are a bit stronger than Clara's."

Her mother and Susan lifted her back into bed. Her head fell on a cooled and shaken pillow, and for a short while she slept.

Then they all came back—Aquilla the gipsy, Saul, Emma Marchant, Susan Peascod, old Mrs Dyer, Mrs Conney, Petronill Ash, Lady Rushfurlong, all the lot of them, screaming and tearing and mocking and fighting and singing over her till the next cold bath drove them away. Thus it went on and on for days and weeks and months and years . . . months and years . . . she was a feeble old woman, too weak to lift her head, too weak to turn away her eyes from the light, though the light hurt them.

She was lying in bed now. Hitherto her gleams of consciousness had come only when she was in the cold bath. But now she was in bed, lying with her head turned towards the window, which was full of a dim, rusty sunset. A shadow moved between her and the window, and then Susan's face appeared, looking down at her.

"Well, Laura?"

"Well. . . ."

Her voice sounded like a kitten's squeal. It frightened her. With an effort she turned her face to the wall.

"You're getting better, dearie," said Susan.

That was when she told the doctor that Laura had had an hour's good sleep.

After that evening came other intervals of consciousness; as time passed they came more frequently and lasted longer. Sometimes she was able to speak—to her mother, to Clara, to Susan, to Philip.

"My little girl's getting better," said Philip one day.

"She may thank you for that," said her mother.

"And you. I could have done nothing without your nursing."

"Oh, Philip," said Laura, "you have been so good. . . ."

She could say no more, but lay watching him as he stood and talked to her mother. His voice came to her in waves, ebbing and flowing like the sound of the sea, and she passed from listening into sleep.

§2

There was a question which she wanted to ask, but she could ask it only of Susan Peascod. She must wait for some time when she and Susan were alone, and when she was feeling especially strong and able. Once or twice she could have asked it, but her courage failed her. Then one evening when she had been getting better for about a week, she said:

"Susan, tell me—does Saul know I'm ill?"

"Yes, he knows, my dear."

"Then why . . ." her voice faltered, but Susan seemed to know what she wanted to say.

"I wrote and told him how you were getting on, and he said that if there was any danger of your dying he'd come, but if there wasn't he'd better not."

For a moment Laura could not speak, then she asked feebly—"And wasn't there any danger of my dying?"

"Not any particular danger. 'Tis a larmentable sickness, but yours is what they call a mild case."

"A mild case!"

"Surely; leastways the doctor kept it down. Seemingly many folk get worse instead of better in the third week, but you began to pull around. Your husband said as others ud have done the same if they'd bin put into baths, same as your mother did for you; but seemingly most of 'em were too scared—and I own I was scared myself when I heard what he was after, but, says I, reckon he's a doctor and I'm not, so it ain't for me to argue."

Laura felt that Susan was just chattering to take her thoughts away from the painful subject on which they had started. But she meant to go on.

"Susan, I think Saul might have come to see me, being so ill, even if I wasn't like to die just yet."

"It's a long way to come from Whissendine."

"He'd have come if he loved me."

Susan said nothing.

"Reckon he doesn't love me any more—or maybe not so much."

Susan still said nothing.

"I wish you'd speak, Sue, and not try to shut me down. Reckon I'll be happier if I get clear with myself that Saul doesn't love me."

"Dearie, he hasn't told me nothing. I can only guess, same as you're doing yourself. And I can tell you this—that it would be better if he didn't love you any more, nor you loved him neither."

For a few moments Laura lay silent. Tears of weakness and sorrow gathered in her eyes, and rolled down her cheeks. With her sense of Saul's abandonment grew the sense of her own reproach.

"Reckon it's my own doing. I treated him bad from the start, and he couldn't forgive me. You can't expect to treat a man bad and it make no difference. But I thought maybe he loved me enough to forgive me. Philip loves me enough for that."

Susan looked at her earnestly.

"I'm glad you see it, dearie."

"See what?"

"What you've just said. If Saul can't forget you treated him bad, reckon you treated him no worse than you treated Philip, and there he is, loving you more than ever."

"More, Susan? Do you think he loves me more?"

"I reckon he loves you more than ever."

For a little while Laura lay still in an effort of thought. Then she said slowly—

"Maybe I treated him worse than I treated Saul."

"Maybe you did, but he doesn't think of it."

“Oh Saul! Saul!” cried Laura suddenly hiding her face—“Oh, Saul! Oh cruel! Why haven’t you any kindness?”

She began to sob breathlessly, and Susan could hardly comfort her.

§4

The days passed, and she did not speak of Saul again. Susan did not revive the subject. Laura was still too ill to face it, though in spite of her depression she was quickly growing better. She had a good constitution, and the attack, though it had shown some ugly signs at the start, had yielded to the doctor’s skill. . . . Philip’s heart was full of a profound, exciting thankfulness. Among the many he had lost, he had been able to save this dearest thing. The misery, anxiety, labour and frustration of the last two months were almost forgotten when he thought of Laura, when he saw her with the tints of life once more in her face, heard her voice, weak as yet, but once more her own dear voice—no longer the voice of a tormented stranger.

Sometimes, too, it seemed almost as if her heart was coming back to him. There were only the slightest tokens, but the dependence on him which had grown up during her illness, did not pass away with her reviving health. She still seemed glad of his care, to find his visits welcome, though she had but little to say.

One morning he told her that he should have to give up coming twice a day.

"You're well on the road to recovery now, and I feel I oughtn't to take the time from my other cases."

"Oh, Philip!"

"I'm sorry, dear, but I still have some patients who are very bad indeed, and I feel I ought to give them all the time I can. When things are easier I can come back to my two visits."

"Will things be easier soon?"

"I hope so—I expect so. If only this wretched weather would break . . . we seem to have nothing but dry storms, and then everything goes on as it did before. And I'll tell you something for certain that's good. I'm to have another doctor to help me next week. The hospital is able to send somebody at last."

"Oh, Phil, I'm glad."

"So am I, I can tell you."

She looked up at him and saw that his face was thinner. It was tanned with the sun, but deep lines were dug in it—lines of fatigue.

"Phil, you look very tired."

"It's been hard work, Laura. But when this new man comes, I'll be able to get my nights. I've promised myself that directly he comes I'll take three whole nights in bed . . . not but that the night work isn't getting lighter now. Sometimes I feel we've managed to turn the corner—and if only it would rain. . . ."

"When the bad time's over, you must have a rest. How long will this doctor stay?"

"As long as I want him. I'd been thinking that when

it's safe for me to go, and when you're quite well again, I—I'd take a little holiday."

He looked at her anxiously as if he hoped there were words that she would say, but though she half knew what they were, she could not say them. All she could manage was——

"You've been very good to me, Philip."

"Good!—oh, my darling, don't say 'good.'"

"Yes, good. You have been good . . . when I've been so bad to you."

"Don't speak of that."

"It's true. You don't know how bad I've been."

"I don't ever want to know . . . you poor little soul."

He stooped down and kissed her. "Darling, I'm your husband. I love you. Nothing can change that."

"No," she murmured, "seemingly it can't."

§5

A couple of days later, Susan came into the room, holding something under her apron. When she had made sure that they were alone, she took it out and gave it to Laura. It was a letter from Saul.

"It goes against me to give you this, Laura. I feel a sneak to Philip; but Saul sent it in a letter to me. Howsoever, I shall write and tell I won't be a go-between for him and you."

Laura's hands trembled as she tore the envelope. She saw that Susan was going out.

"Don't leave me, Sue."

"Very well, then."

She came back and stood beside the bed, looking out of the window. Laura read the few lines that covered in their sprawl the whole of the sheet. They were the same few lines that he so seldom wrote, telling her that she must not think he did not love her because he had not found a home for her yet, that it was impossible for him to find anything "till next fall at earliest," but if by then she was still in the same mind as she was now he promised to stand by her. The only novelty was "I am so sorry you have been ill. Susan has told me how ill you have been, but that you are getting better now. Get well soon."

A low sob made Susan turn round to the bed.

"What is it, Laura?"

"Nothing new, nothing special. 'Tis only as I see plain he doesn't really love me any more."

"Well, my dear, there's no harm in that. I for one am glad of it."

"How can you speak so!"

"Because I love you both."

"Both?"

"Yes—you and Saul, and I see it's not for the good of neither of you that you should go on loving."

"Oh, Susan, how can you say that? Why, at the beginning you wanted us to wed."

"At the beginning—yes. But not now. Now's different. You've got another husband, and, to my mind, a husband worth keeping."

"I know Phil's been good."

"'Good.' . . . Is that all you have to say? Well, no matter. Listen to me, Laura, I'm going to speak plain, for you're able to stand it now. I own that at the beginning I wanted you to marry Saul, and I still think you'd have better done it. Now, don't cry, dear, for it's all past and can't be altered. I was against your marrying the doctor, but now you've done it, and must abide by it, to my way of thinking. I reckon Saul is still willing and ready to have you some day, if you will wait for him, but I can't see as you could ever be happy together now. I know the kind he is—he'd always have it against you the way you've treated him, and he'd never feel truly easy with another man's wife, however much she was divorced. I think it's plain enough that he doesn't love you the way he used. Maybe at the start he loved you as much as Philip did, maybe he loved you more, but seemingly his love ain't the kind that'll stand what Phil's will stand. You've got a faithful man there, Laura."

"Yes, I know—I know."

"Then you'd be a fool to leave him for one that ain't so faithful. I'm not speaking against Saul. He's a dear friend of mine, and I don't blame him for not standing what no man should be asked to stand."

"Still there's some as'll stand it."

"One in a thousand, maybe. And you've got that one."

Laura lay quite still, her face turned to the wall.

CHAPTER XXI

§I

The rain came on the first night of October. Ushered in by the blurred crescent of a young moon, it began to fall at midnight. Philip had gone to bed early, but woke at the unaccustomed sound. The darkness was complete, unbroken even by the window's shape, and through it swept a soft hissing like a sigh. He lay and listened, and wondered. Could this be the rain? He had so often hoped before, and been disappointed. But here was none of the broken promise of a storm—no wind, no thunder, no sound of fury, just this faint rustle upon the night. He remembered last night's moon—how her crescent had heeled over in the sky, "holding rain," as country people say, how it had lain dim above the west; while the moon that had died a few days ago had been like glass—golden glass—dim only as she rose through the clouds that the heat had left on the edge of the world . . . great harvest moon . . . he was asleep again.

He woke at three, and the rain was still falling. This time he would make sure. He slipped out of bed and groped across to the window, looking out into the black

night. As his eyes grew accustomed to it, he could make out the roofs of the houses across the street, and as he listened, he could hear mingled with the hiss the tinkle of gutters, of full runnels ringing like bells. He put out his hand, and felt the drops that he could not see, and at the same time there crept to his nostrils the scent of the moist earth, breathing out sweets as the rain refreshed her and ended her drought.

Glory be to God! No doubt those farmers who heard the rain tonight were thanking Him for their delivered fields, for soil that had been dust and stone now moistening for the Autumn plough and the Autumn seed, for dried ponds filling up and parched meadows sweetening for cattle. But the doctor's praise was all for human deliverance, for wells and cisterns that would be full again, for pipes and drains and gutters that would be washed clean, for dust that would be laid and flies that would disappear. So thankful was he that he could not sleep, and lay awake till dawn, listening to the sweet murmur of the latter rain.

The next morning it still fell—a steady drench. In the garden the trees were a sour green against the grey sky, for the drought had withheld their gold. The rain was like a thin grey curtain wavering before them. Pools were forming on a lawn too parched to drink. Philip took his mackintosh out of the cupboard where it had hung unused for weeks, and set out on his round rejoicing.

Everywhere he went people were welcoming the rain,

though mostly for their crops and their beasts rather than themselves. Everywhere he went people had foreseen it and could have told him all about it days ago.

"When the wind changes between two moons," said Luck of Ellenwhorne, "it always brings good rain."

"'Tis a gift from the moon," said old grandfather Luck, "the old moon sends it to the new, and if the earth manages to git in between she catches some of it off the wind."

"Reckon grandfather's weather's gitting as mixed as his inside," said young Mrs Luck, who hated to see an old joke die. "D'you remember, Doctor, how he had you out one evening all on account of his heart having changed over, as he said in his tedious folly?"

Yes, thought Philip to himself, and I called at Coarse-horne on the way home.

He called there on his way home today. Between this visit and that lay madness, sweetness, disappointment, betrayal and misery—and now at the end a faint hope, dim and blurred as the new moon that brought the rain. He had been a fool to begin such a courtship—to let a final touch of exasperation break through the guard he had kept so long over his loneliness. Grandfather Luck had more to answer for than he knew. . . . But somehow, though he confessed its folly, he could not wish the past undone. He could not wish himself back in the old days of ignorance and incompleteness. He did not want to go back, but to go on. He still felt that he could

make Laura happy, if she would let him try again. Would she let him? He could not answer. There was always that dim hope like the new moon, taking its light from stray words that she let fall, from stray looks, from a response that he sometimes thought he saw in her eyes, from this blessing which her illness had brought of a sweet new dependence. She had not spoken once of the shadows between them, which sometimes seemed to him now to be shadows indeed. Saul's name was never spoken. Was it much in her thoughts? How fared his image in her heart?

At the farm the rain seemed almost merry. It rattled and tinkled like a song upon the roofs, it pattered like dancing feet upon the stones of the yard, and ran in a gay river down the yard drain. He was surprised to find none of the Blaziers about; the man who took his horse told him that his Mäaster was busy in the stable with a sick mare, while the Missus and Miss Clara had driven over to the auction at Platnix, where they hoped to pick up a few bits for the house.

"And who's looking after Miss Laura?"

"That'll be Miss Susan Peascod, surelye. Reckon she's here most days."

Philip knew that she was, but up till now he had seldom met her. Today he was glad of the chance. He had always liked Susan Peascod; her gaiety, her kindness and her sanity had refreshed him many times both before and since his marriage, and he was sincerely grateful to her for her faithful goodness to Laura.

She came to the door as he went in.

"Good morning, Doctor. What do you thing of the rain?"

"Splendid. It's exactly what we all want. How's Laura?"

"Doing fine. She's asleep, but I'm just going to take her up a cup of milk."

"It's uncommonly good of you to come and nurse her like this. I've heard a great deal about your kindness."

"Oh, reckon Laura's one of my oldest friends; and today her mother and Clara didn't want to miss the auction. Seemingly poor Mrs Marchant is going to live in a town, so there'll be a lot of household stuff going. I believe Mrs Blazier's hoping to get a new kitchen table and dresser out of it."

He followed her into the kitchen, for she could not leave her saucepan.

"And you really think Laura's getting on?"

"Surelye, I do. Anyone can see the change day by day. But it's not for me to tell the doctor about that."

"You're with her more constantly than I can be—you are able to watch her in a dozen little days. It's not her body that I'm thinking of—I know all about that—it's her mind. Do—do you think that's getting better?—getting happier, I mean?"

Susan thought for a moment.

"Reckon her mind's had more to bear than her body," she said slowly.

He wondered how much she knew—everything prob-

ably, since she was Saul Peascod's cousin and Laura's friend. But he faltered on the edge of asking her. The next minute her milk was ready, and they left the room together.

Upstairs Laura lay drowsy and half awake. She too had something to say about the rain, murmuring as Philip kissed her. Susan put the milk into her hands, stooping low over the bed, and Philip thought he heard whispering. He could not catch Susan's words, but Laura's came less discreetly—"Oh, Sue, I can't. You must." Susan said aloud—"Don't be hem silly, my dear," and walked out of the room.

"What's the matter eh?" asked Philip.

Laura flushed.

"She wants me to tell you something, and I dunno why I can't bring myself to do it."

"You needn't tell me anything you don't want, my darling."

"But I must tell you some time, and there's no sense putting it off. But I don't want to talk about it when it's told. 'Tis that I've got shut of Saul Peascod."

"Got shut of him!"

"Yes, I wrote and told him we had better never see each other again."

Philip clenched his hands, which were trembling. He gazed at her silently, for he would respect her wish not to talk about what she had done—more than she respected it herself, it appeared,, for she continued sadly—

"For some time I've been seeing that he doesn't care

the way he used. It's my own fault. I treated him shameful. Maybe he loves me in his own way, but he doesn't want to have me with him—to marry me. . . .”

Her voice faltered into tears, and she sobbed bitterly.

Philip gathered her into his arms, cherishing her against him like a child. She felt almost as small and frail as a child—he could tell how her illness had worn her, and his heart nearly choked him with pity.

“Sweetheart—sweetheart, don't cry; it's bad for you. Think of how I love you—let me love you and comfort you, darling.”

“Oh, Philip—I've been bad—bad—to you . . . far worse than I've been to him. Don't say you forgive me—not now—for I couldn't bear it.”

§2

Half an hour later he came downstairs and met Susan Peascod. She came out of the kitchen as he appeared, then faltered, while her eyes asked him a question.

“She's told me,” said Philip.

“Oh, I'm glad.”

He knew now that Susan must know all about himself, and Saul and Laura, and there were many things that he wanted terribly to ask her; but he still lacked the courage. She too seemed shy, for she brought back the conversation to less disturbing matters.

“How did you find her?”

“Better—much better and stronger. But of course this

illness has pulled her down dreadfully—it always does. She will be a long time getting over it.”

“Maybe she should ought to go away for a change.”

“Yes, she ought—when she’s stronger.”

“That’ll be some while yet.”

“Perhaps in a month or so she could go away to the sea. . . . I’m hoping to be able to take a short holiday myself.”

As he looked into her honest eyes, he at last found courage.

“I wonder—have you—do you know—if there’s any chance she might come with me?”

Susan hesitated.

“We haven’t spoken of it—but since you’re putting the question I think it’ll be your own fault if she doesn’t.”

“You think that!”

“I think that, though as I’m telling you, she hasn’t said nothing—not a word. All I know is that she’s powerful struck with your goodness.”

“My goodness? That doesn’t help much.”

“Well, there’s some who haven’t been so good, and she sees the difference.”

“But when you talk of ‘goodness’ in that way, it makes me feel she’s turned to me only as a doctor who’s been kind to her and helped her through a bad illness.”

“I wasn’t meaning it so. Maybe you haven’t quite got the hang of our speech around here. By your goodness I mean your loving-kindness, standing by her when others

had left her, loving her when she'd forsaken you, forgiving her when she'd treated you bad——"

"Don't, please. I can't bear to think she's feeling that way about me . . . 'forgiving her.' Good Lord! I need some forgiveness for the fool I've been."

"Well," said Susan frankly, "I don't say you don't."

She had lost her shyness now, and as he was silent for a moment surprised by this sudden rap of her slow speech, he continued——

"You married her without knowing the sort of girl she was, and that's brought you most of your trouble."

"You're perfectly right. I was an ignorant ass about women."

"Reckon you know more about them now."

"Reckon I do—I ought to, anyway."

"Well, there's two things about her I want to tell you, in case you don't know them, and if you'll forgive the liberty."

"Please tell me."

"I've been Laura's friend a dunnamany years—for I was only six when I first came to live along of my Uncle Sam—and I can tell you this, that in spite of her ways, she's just like the rest of us inside. An ordinary, common, country girl, I mean. She always had her airs, even before she went to school, and afterwards they sometimes got past bearing. 'Come, Laura,' I'd say, 'stop looking as if you was sitting at a grand pianoforty and be easy and comfortable like the rest of us,' You mustn't mind my talking of her like this, for that was the way I talked to

her many a time. Then when you married her she was being a tedious fine lady, and I could see you was taken in by it. But even since her marriage she's been natural sometimes, when she got away among us. If you'd talk to her long enough her voice ud change so that you'd almost laugh . . . and I reckon you'd have done better if you'd treated her as what she was instead of as what she looked. But that was more her fault than yours."

"But how am I to treat her as what she is? I haven't got two sets of manners—one for fine ladies and one for country girls."

"Speak rough to her sometimes, and make her mind you. Don't let her have her own way always. It isn't what we girls expect inside of us, whatever we may say about it. It isn't the way in our own homes—all except this one, where poor Mus' Blazier is known for an owl. I'm not saying that you don't want Laura to live like a lady, seeing as she's your wife, but you must know she's got all to learn about it, and you'll have to teach her, and you'll never teach her just by kindness."

Philip laughed.

"There's truth in my words," said Susan rather sharply. "If you'd started that way, maybe you wouldn't have had this trouble. Lord, I could have smacked her myself over that Lady Rushfurlong business."

"I'm sorry I laughed—but it was at the picture of me being rough with Laura. I'm afraid I'm not made that way, you know, so I hope it's not really essential. But I'm glad you told me."

"There's another thing I should ought to tell you," said Susan in a different voice—"but you must excuse the liberty. Laura wants a child."

Philip did not laugh.

"Yes," she continued, colouring—"she told me so herself, and it's what most women want, I reckon."

"She—she never spoke of it to me."

"No—she spoke to me."

"Oh my Lord," cried Philip, "what a fool I've been!"

They stood facing each other, both a little embarrassed. Susan was twisting her apron.

"You must excuse the liberty."

"My dear girl. . . ." Philip stammered, for he feared Susan might think he was offended—"You've spoken like a friend—like a good friend. I'll never forget what a friend you've been to Laura—and to me."

"I didn't take your side at the start," said Susan candidly—"I was all for her marrying Saul and living the life she'd been born to. But since she's married you, says I, she must stand by it and not go hankering after what's forbidden."

"Do you think . . . do you know how much she still loves him?"

"I dunno. Maybe not very much now. I tell you it'll be your own fault if you don't have her."

Philip gazed at her, standing there before him in her cotton gown, all pink and bright, like a large pink daisy, breathing out health and warmth and honesty, and as he gazed some of his early admiration for her revived—the

admiration that if circumstances had not pushed him a different way might have made him seek love and happiness from her instead of Laura—and possibly find them more easily.

“By Jove, Susan! You’re splendid. The man who gets you gets a prize. Tell me, is anyone going to get it soon?”

Susan bridled a little.

“Well, there’s young Joe Penhurst *and* there’s Teddy Pont . . . those are the only two I’m like to choose between, but I can’t tell you yet which it’ll be.”

“Well, whoever it is, he’s a lucky man. Goodbye, dear Susan, and God bless you.”

§3

It was raining again when, a few days later, the Parish Council met. Philip was afraid that now the weather had definitely broken, the Councillors might think better of their promise to consider a new water-supply for Speldham. But circumstances befriended him. Lardner would not break his word to the man who had saved his cow, and both the wife and son of Ades, one of the Councillors, who kept the general shop in Speldham, had gone down with typhoid—the most recent cases. Moreover, there was on the Council a general feeling that the doctor had behaved extremely well during the last month or two. The parish hummed with tales of his skill and kindness. No doubt he deserved something of it in return for all his care.

Hence it was that, much to his surprise, twelve Parish Councillors listened respectfully to his project for obtaining a new water-supply for Speldham from the Rother Marshes, and at the end of the meeting a motion was carried unanimously for its further investigation. Two firms of contractors were to be approached for estimates. It seemed likely that those poor folk who during the last two months had died in Speldham of the Speldham Brook had indeed died for their own people. As Philip left the Schoolhouse, where the meeting had been held, he realised that probably never again would the dread epidemic lift its head in Speldham. It had done its worst, and thanks to its terror and to the recovery of Mr Lardner's cow, would never be able to repeat the evil.

Nevertheless, he was unprepared for Bottom's suggestion, made when he brought round Trimmer that afternoon.

"There's a strong feeling in the village, Sir, as we should have some sort of a general thanksgiving for our deliverance from plague, pestilence and famine. One or two folks have spoke to me about it, and I thought that if you'd no objection I'd say a few words to Mus' Roffey this afternoon."

"Well, I should say it would be better not to shout till we were out of the wood. When do you want this thing to happen?"

"As soon as possible, Mäaster. Maybe next week. I believe I'm right in saying there haven't been no fresh sickenings since last Tuesday?"

"You're quite right. But there may be others today—any day. We can't feel safe till there's been none for a fortnight."

Bottom shook his head.

"That would never do, Sir. The feeling's this—that we should have the thanksgiving while I'm still acting as Parish Clerk. Mrs Gain told me as how she was expecting Mäaster Gain to be back at his duties by the week after next, and reckon he can't expect to find his voice anything but in dishabille after the sickness he's had. 'Twould be a pity and a strain for him to have to lead the choir on such an occasion."

"So that's it, is it? You want to do the singing. Very well, have your thanksgiving when you like, you old villain, but remember it'll sound odd if half the parish is down with enteric."

"They won't be down, Sir. Reckon the Lord would never treat us so, nor you allow it. I tell you I'm acting out of kindness to Mäaster Gain. If he was to start his voice on a day like that, maybe he'd have to go back to his bed and have the fever twice. 'Tis better as a sound and hearty man should sing. 'Twill be a fine occasion. We'll ask Mus' Pont to bring his trumpet and hoot lik the day of Judgment."

§4

That evening a surprise awaited him at Coarsehorne. He called in as usual on his way home, and instead of

being ushered upstairs by his mother-in-law, was met with an air of mystery.

"Step into the parlour a moment, Philip,—you're early."

She drove him into the darkness of green wall-paper and drawn blinds.

"Mayn't I go and see Laura?"

"In a minute, wait a minute. All in good time. I must just run out and see. . . ."

She scuttled out of the room, shutting the door. The kitchen door opened, and he heard voices. He guessed at once what had happened, and, his eyes growing accustomed to the dusty green light, he moved about the room, fingering small objects and smiling to himself. It was a long time since he had been in the parlour. Considering its importance at Coarsehorne, it was remarkable how seldom he had been in it at all. He thought of the first time he had ever come to the farm, to that curious evening party. There they had sat, nearly twenty of them, crowded up among the furniture. And Susan Peascod had sung—"Over the mountain and over the moor." . . . He could remember the tune, and her fresh young voice singing it. He hummed a stave or two.

"You can come—we're ready now."

Mrs Blazier's head was round the door, and he followed her into the kitchen, where he found, as he had expected, Laura sitting up, wrapped in shawls and propped with pillows in a big armchair by the fire.

"Laura! My lovely girl! What a surprise!"

He put his arms round her and hugged her tenderly. She looked pitifully small and white among her pillows. Her skin had lost its softness and delicate bloom—it was lined about her mouth and eyes and had a tired, yellowish tint. Her eyes were huge and haggard, with deep hollows under them, and her pretty hair had lost all its sheen and vitality. To Philip she had never been so dear.

“I felt so much better,” she murmured—“I thought I’d do it as a surprise for you.”

“And what about your doctor’s orders, Ma’am?” he scolded. “Did he say you might get up today? Or has Dr O’Connor arrived a day before he said, and come to see you?”

“Oh, Phil, I was sure you wouldn’t mind. You’d said I might get up soon.”

“Of course I don’t mind, sweetheart, as long as you don’t tire yourself. But you must go back to bed in a few minutes.”

“Don’t send me back to bed, when I’m enjoying it all so much. Everything feels new and lovely downstairs. Let me stay till you’re gone.”

“Very well, then. You may stay till I’m gone.”

He sat down beside her, and after a certain amount of chatter and exclamation Mrs Blazier and Clara went out, leaving them alone together. They always made a point of doing this, hoping no doubt that such tact would help the troublously married pair. But hitherto Laura and Philip had found little to say to each other beyond commonplaces. This time Laura began:

"Did you say the new doctor was coming tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'm expecting him tomorrow evening."

"He'll stay in the house with you, I suppose?"

"Yes; there's plenty of room, and it'll be a bit of company for me."

"When do you think you'll be able to go away?"

"I don't know. There have been no fresh cases of typhoid for a week now, but I don't feel quite safe. Especially as Bottom has insisted on there being a public thanksgiving in church next Sunday. I told him we weren't out of danger yet, but he's set on having it while Gain's too ill to sing. He wants to be clerk himself, the old ruffian, so next Sunday we shall give a big shout even though we're still in the wood."

"Can Bottom sing?"

"About as well as a frog."

"Phil, when you go away, may I come with you?"

Her question came jerking into their commonplaces, and at first he scarcely understood. He stared at her and hesitated. Then he saw that her lips were white and that she was trembling.

"Laura! My darling, don't look at me like that. Of course you shall come. Oh God! Did you think I was hesitating? It was only that you took me so completely by surprise. I—I didn't expect. . . ."

He strained her to him, kissing warmth and colour into her cold, pale face.

"Of course you shall come. Oh, my sweetest girl, how happy you've made me! We'll go away together—right

away to the New Forest, or to Devonshire. We—we'll have another honeymoon."

She hid her face in his shoulder.

"Phil. . . . I don't know."

"Darling, do say this—that you'll give me another chance to try and make you happy."

"Oh, you mustn't talk like that. You're been good all through—and I've been bad . . . as bad as has ever been."

"Now you mustn't talk like that either. Sweetheart, can't we manage to forget the last few months? As for me, I simply must, for I can't bear to think of all you've suffered, you poor little thing."

"And what I've made you suffer."

"Never mind that, or I'll have to start talking of all the ways I've hurt you. My darling, I know I've been a stupid fellow—that I haven't understood things as I ought . . . that I've taken too much for granted. But don't let's talk about it, please, for I want to forget it. Besides, I mustn't make you tired; this is your first day up, and you'll feel it if I let you be distressed."

"I'm not really distressed. I feel happy. Phil——"

"What is it, dear?"

"You won't mind if just at first I seem a bit strange? There are things in my heart . . . but the best way to forget them is not to talk about them—just let them die . . . they will soon. So you won't take any notice if sometimes I seem a bit as if—as if I wasn't there?"

"My own!"

He drew her tight in his arms, loving her so much that he felt he could wait long years if he knew that at the end of those years she would be all his at last.

§5

No new upcrop of the dreaded fever prevented the great Thanksgiving Service taking place on the following Sunday. There had been a certain amount of disaffection in the village—Philip discovered that the “feeling” which Bottom said had prompted the ceremony was far from unanimous. Several of the sick, who might reasonably want to be present, were still in bed, or too weak to go to church; while Tom Gain, the clerk, nearly brought on a relapse by his efforts to prove himself well enough to officiate instead of Bottom.

“’Twould serve that wicked old man right if he was to be took bad wud the very same sickness he’s praising the Lord for having ended, which as everyone knows ain’t ended yet, there being Freddie Stack and Martha Copland and Mrs Pont and Mrs Ades still lying in bed or only tottering about, and maybe someone else to go sick and the whole thing bust out over again.”

It was felt, perhaps justly, that the event had been organised by Bottom entirely for his own display. He had got around Mr Roffey by pruning his trees and cutting his hedges, in the doctor’s time which he’s paid for, and everybody except Mr Roffey knowing it’s the wrong time of year for pruning and hedging. ’Twould serve him right if he fell down dead.

Whether or not it was in hope of seeing the divine displeasure sensationally visiting Bottom, all Speldham filled the church on that autumn Sunday. The Galleybird pew was empty, the Rushfurlongs having been abroad since July, so the congregation was made up entirely from the farms. Though some familiar worshippers were away through illness, others less familiar had taken their places. Farmers and labourers had come from far and near—from Alehouse Farm, from Redpale Farm, from Ringlets and Founthill and Rushy Green and Ghazel Sloop, from Oxbottom's Town on the borders of Bulverhythe, from Dinglesden in the parish of Brede, from every farm or village or hamlet where the folk had known the terror of the sickness.

Some came to give thanks for their recovery or the recovery of their dear ones, others for their escape. Mr and Mrs Luck of Ellenwhorne brought old Grandfather Luck, still hale and hypochondriac. Aquilla Ripley came with the other gipsies—who might well give thanks, seeing that they had defied every hygienic law and thriven. The Batups from Poppinghole were there—the first cases—and the Penhursts from Widow's, Joe and Naomi still looking rather pale and glad of their seats. Mrs Cruttenden had come, in spite of having lost all her hair, and having to wear a handkerchief tied round her head under her bonnet. Looking round the church, Philip saw many people whom he should have liked then and there to order back to bed.

He sat with Joe Blazier and Clara—Mrs Blazier had

stayed at home with Laura—taking the outside of the pew, as he always did in church, in case he should be called out suddenly. In front of them sat the family from Churchville—Sam Peascod, with Mark and Harry and Reuben and Aaron, and their cousin Sue looking like a summer hayfield in her new yellow dress and a bonnet full of daisies.

Mr Roffey came in, with Bottom in his clerk's gown. Their heads rose up in the two lower boxes of the big three-decker. It was rumoured that Mr Roffey did not "hold with" thanksgiving services any more than he "held with" prayers for rain; but in both cases he had had to give way to popular religion.

"To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him. . . ."

The service had begun and the congregation stood up with a great rumble. It was to be a special service, with special psalms and special lessons. The school-children had been rehearsing their singing all the week, but there was a long time yet before they could fill their lungs with Tate and Brady. First must come the droning dust between Bottom and Mr Roffey. Echoes of far-off thanksgivings in Eastern lands, of strange people released from strange plagues, drawled their way into the silence of Speldham Church. The congregation sat in complete stillness, while these two undertook for them, expressing their inarticulate gratitude in phrases of Tudor English and metaphors of the Orient and accents of the Sussex marshes.

Mr Roffey: "O Sing unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord, all the whole earth."

Bottom: "Sing unto t'Lard, and praise his näum: be tellun of his salväation from day to day."

Mr Roffey: "Let the heavens rejoice, and the earth be glad: let the sea make a noise, and all that therein is."

Bottom: "Let the field be joyful, and all that is in't: then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lard."

Philip listened with a full heart. It was strange to hear his thanksgiving on the lips of Bottom, nevertheless he was glad it should be there. He was on the whole a simple, shy man with his God, but he wanted to tell Him how thankful he was to have this second chance of making happiness for his dearest one. Please God he would not fail again—he was a little wiser now. He had learned his lesson and fought his battle. Laura would soon be all his, as hitherto she had never been. He had won her in the fair field of love, taking her from the man who loved her less, "Let the best lover win"—and he had won. O praise the Lord!

Mr Roffey: "Shew yourselves joyful unto the Lord, all ye lands: Sing, rejoice and give thanks."

Bottom: "Praise the Lard upon the häarp:.sing to the häarp wud a psalm of thanksgivun."

Mr Roffey: "With trumpets also and shawns: O show yourselves joyful before the Lord the King."

Bottom: "Let the sea määke a noise, and all that therein is: the raound warld, and they that dwell therein."

Philip thought of the time ahead when he and Laura would be away together. He did not think he would have to wait much longer now. Dr O'Connor was settling down well to his work—he had taken Philip's morning round today—and every week the sickness was abating. There had been no fresh cases for nearly ten days . . . even his physician's anxiety would soon be ended. He thought of the promise of the future, the promise of health and purity, the promise of the Rother marshes; and he thanked heaven again for a land healed.

Mr Roffey: "O be joyful unto the Lord all ye lands: serve the Lord with gladness, and come before his presence with a song."

Bottom: "Be ye sure that the Lard he is God: it is He that hath mäade us, and not we ourselves; we are his people and the ship of His pasture."

There was a slight commotion at the back of the church. A young labourer had come in and was looking round him. Lardner of Worge slipped out of his church-

warden's pew, and there was a lot of whispering. Then Lardner came up to Philip.

"Doctor, you've been sent for—something urgent."

"Who is it?"

"A young chap from Lankhurst Farm. He's waiting at the back of the church."

During this conversation nearly everyone had turned round and was staring at the doctor's pew. Agitated whispering broke up the sonorities of Bottom and Mr Roffey.

"Ah, I knew how 'twould be . . . another case of fever." "See what come of tempting Providence." "'Tis to be hoped this will be a lesson to old Bottom." "Who is it that's come?" "A labourer—sent from some pläace"—"sick of the fever"—"maybe 'tis from Cockmartin's Farm" . . . "High Wigsell" . . . "Great Streale" . . . "Harman of Great Streale fallen sick of the fever" . . . "dying" . . . "dead" . . . "Bottom should ought to be ashamed of himself."

Philip walked through the whispering and muttering to the west door, for the young man, having delivered his message, had gone to wait outside. His heart was heavy with apprehension. In vain he told himself that the summons need have nothing to do with a fresh outbreak of typhoid—that it was probably some farmyard accident. . . . He could not check the fear that his enemy had risen from the dead, challenging him back into the old war. He saw himself once more in a stifling cottage room, stooping over an unconscious, muttering patient, arguing about cool drinks and open windows,

feeling a pulse that raced and faltered, watching the mercury in his clinical thermometer climb higher and higher, wiping tartar off coated teeth, washing bedsores in methylated spirit . . . all the distress and weariness of the ministry of death. He had shouted for thankfulness at his deliverance—and lo! the trees of the wood were thicker than ever.

In the porch he saw waiting a young fellow whom he recognised at once as a labourer at Lankhurst Farm, away in Bodiam parish.

"Please, Sir—I'm unaccountable sorry to trouble you, sir, but can you come this wunst, sir, to my missus?"

"What's happened? Are you afraid she has the fever?"

The young labourer broke into a broad grin.

"Why, no, sir. Surelye, 'tis that she's been brought to bed a month before we expected. 'Tis our first child, and the midwife sent me to come and fetch you."

Philip nearly laughed out loud.

So all his fears had been for nothing—what a fool he had been! He might have known that the enemy's last kick was gone. He might have remembered that young Mrs Handshut was expecting her confinement in November. But no, his mind had been too full of death to think of birth. He had looked for death, and here was life—the new life coming to fill up the waste places. He felt so uproariously relieved that he nearly went back into the church and shouted the good news. It would have been fun to have called Bottom out of his long-drawn-Ay-ee-man with the order to go at once to the

Chequers and saddle Trimmer. But he thought better of it, and the congregation was left till the end of the service with its conviction that Harman of Great Streale had the typhoid and was already in a dying condition, and maybe this would learn Bottom not to tempt the Lord.

"How did you come over?" he asked Handshut.

"Surelye, my Mäaster lent me his trap to come and fetch you, so I can drive you back straightway."

"Good! That's splendid. We'll call at the house for my bag. Perhaps, Mr Lardner, you'll be kind enough to tell Mr Blazier where I've gone. Tell him I'll come round to see Mrs Green as soon as I'm back."

He followed young Handshut out of the porch into the thick October sunshine. He walked with a confident and springing step, proud to be once more the minister of life.

THE END



